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Short Stories

Twice A Month

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by

W·C·Tuttle

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Yes, we will ship you this Genuine Underwood

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This is the genuine Underwood Typewriter. We offer you the same three models of the Underwood Typewriter being made and sold by the manufacturers today. **Standard 4-row single shift keyboard.** Absolutely visible writing—the **full line** of typewriting is visible at **all times.** All the improvements and attachments that any high grade typewriter ought to have.

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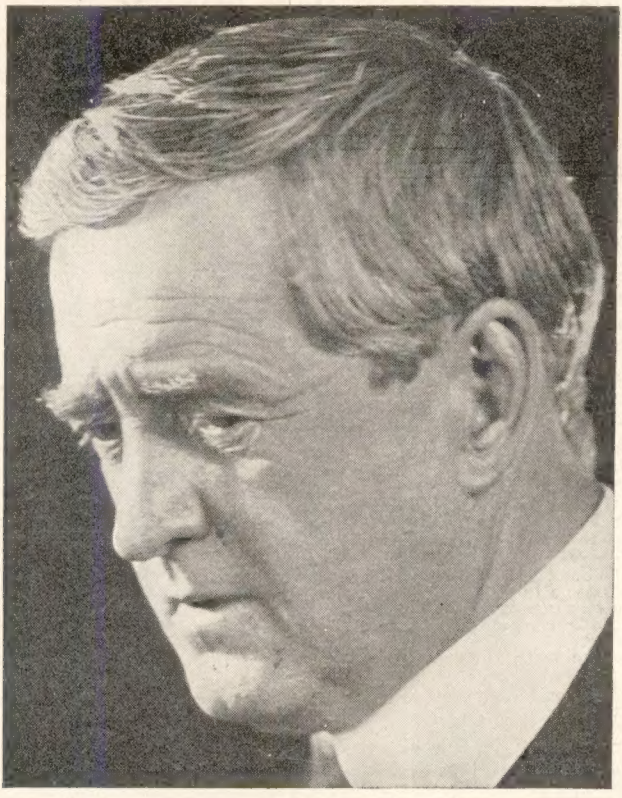

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HERE, right in the prime of his business career, he had fumbled the biggest deal he ever had undertaken. It was the great disappointment of his life. And now he was putting himself through a rigorous self-examination, trying to fathom the reason for his failure.

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* * * *

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Sometimes, of course, halitosis comes from some deep-seated organic disorder that requires professional advice. But usually—and fortunately—halitosis is only a local condition that yields to the regular use of Listerine as a mouth wash and gargle. It is an interesting thing that this well-known antiseptic that has been in use for years for surgical dressings, possesses these unusual properties as a breath deodorant.

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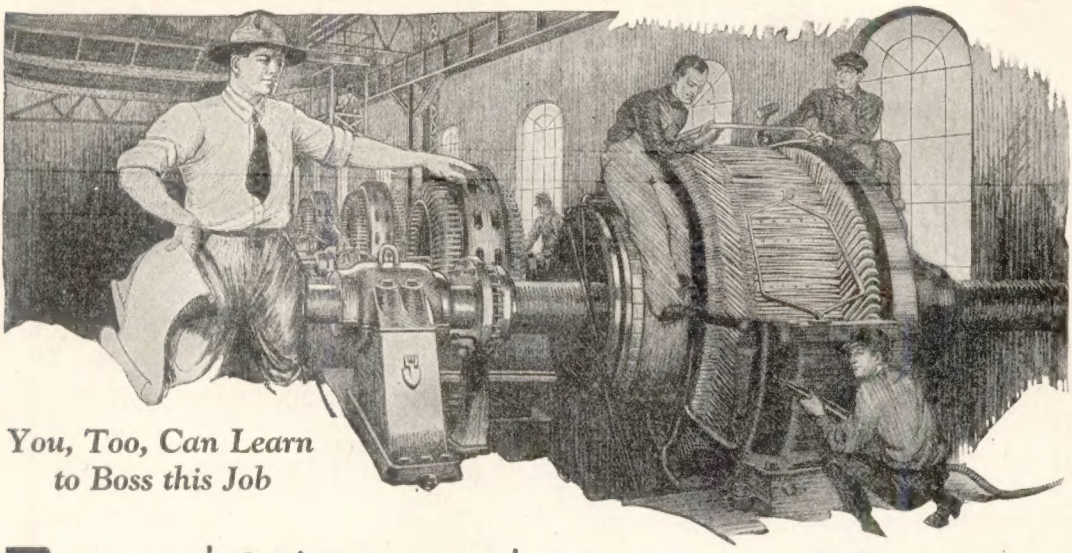

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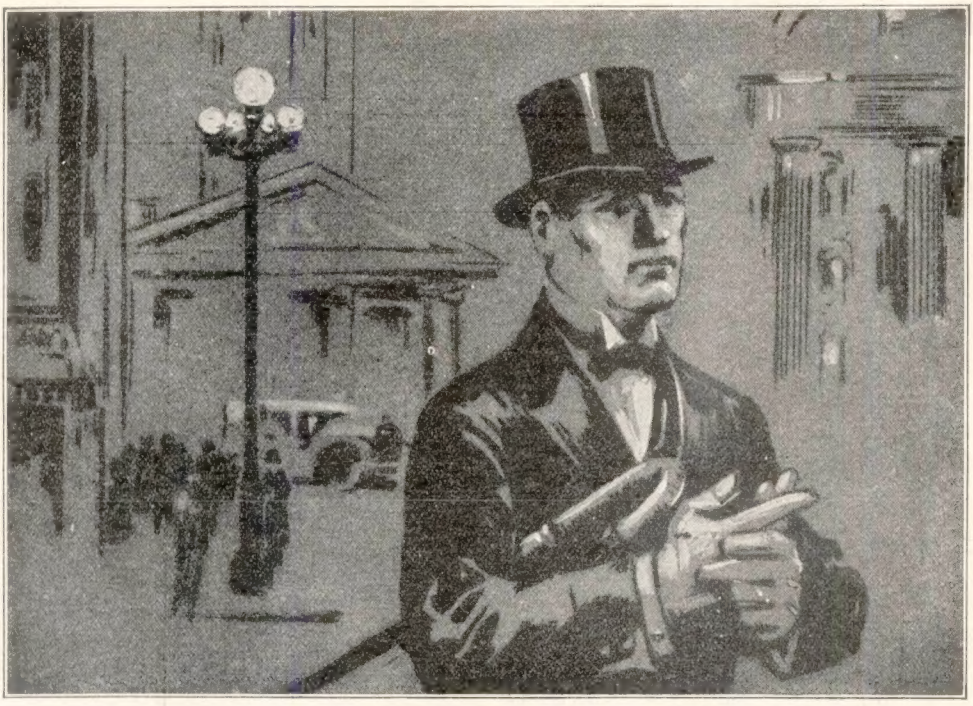

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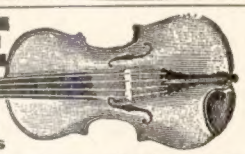

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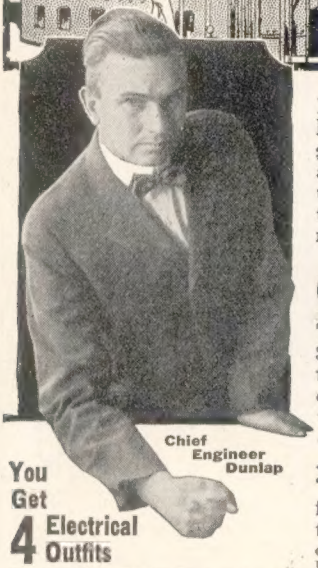

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22 Electrical Engineers

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4 To be suitable for general daily use, a soap should be pure, mild and neutral.

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Cincinnati

January 10, 1925

ShortStories

Vol. CX., No. 1 Whole No. 458

HARRY E. MAULE, EDITOR
D. McILWRAITH, ASSOCIATE EDITOR

GOOD HABITS OR BAD

SOME of these things are so obvious that it seems almost too banal to mention them. Yet the pressure of day-by-day affairs is so acute that most of us go through life fighting the interminable exigencies of the moment, and overlooking all the while the gleaming truth that we really can order our own lives.

Take habits. One of the prime ways of wasting energies that should be turned into the main channel of effort is through bad habits. Of course the mental habits are stronger than the obvious ones with well understood deleterious physical effects, such as smoking too much. We have spoken before of fear. That can become a habit. There are others—the habit of pessimism, of seeing nothing good in your own friends and associates, of being a poor sport in defeat, of bullying in an argument. Carry on the list for yourself.

You can change those bad habits for good ones. William James, the psychologist, puts it thus:

My theory is that the bodily changes follow directly the perception of the exciting fact, and that our feeling of the same changes, as they occur, is the emotion. Common sense says, we lose our fortune, are sorry and weep; we are insulted by a rival, are angry and strike. The hypothesis here to be defended says that this order of sequence is incorrect—and that we feel sorry because we cry, angry because we strike, afraid because we tremble.

In other words if the devil of depression is making you sad try James' formula and *laugh*. You'll find that soon enough the depression will have vanished in genuine happiness. Thus you'll be in better shape to conquer the cause of your trouble. The thing can be applied to the whole range of habits. It will not be easy, but a course of good habits for bad would make a lot of people happier, better citizens.

THE EDITOR.

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YEARLY SUBSCRIPTION PRICE, PAYABLE IN ADVANCE

Postpaid in United States, and to all Possessions of the United States, and Mexico . . $3.00
Postpaid to all Foreign Countries 6.50
Postpaid throughout Canada 5.80

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The next issue *January 25th*

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FIRE BRANDS

By W. C. TUTTLE

Author of "Masked Law," "Straight Shooting," etc.

THERE WAS SOMETHING QUEER ABOUT THE SALE OF THE BAR S RANCH; THOSE ENTERPRISING COWMEN, SAD SONTAG AND SWEDE HARRIGAN, SENSED IT AT ONCE. BUT NOT UNTIL THEIR INTEREST WAS AROUSED BY SPECK, THE YOUNGSTER WHOSE INHERITANCE THE RANCH SHOULD HAVE BEEN, DID THEY DRAW CARDS IN A GAME WHICH PROMISED—AND DELIVERED—EXCITEMENT

I'LL kill him, if it's the last thing I ever do!" yelped "Sad" Sontag. "I tell yuh, I'm goin' to kill him!"

"Quit it, I tell yuh!" wailed the bartender. "Don't do that!"

Swish! Crash!

"Aw-w-w-w, you danged fool!" The bartender's voice was raised in a wailing crescendo. "Look what yuh went and done."

Sad Sontag's face came up from behind the bar and he looked around solemnly. His serious gray eyes considered the red-faced bartender, shifted to "Swede" Harrigan, his partner, and then considered other occupants of the saloon, who were interested.

"Your darned heels knocked some of my glasses down," complained the bartender. "I told yuh not to do it, didn't I? Didn't I tell yuh not to git up on my bar like that?"

"Uh,huh," nodded Sad. "I s'pose yuh did mention it."

"Mention, hell!" The bartender appealed to the crowd. "I'll leave to any of you."

"You kinda overreached yourself, cowboy," observed Swede.

"Uh-huh," Sad squinted around, felt the back of his neck and shrugged his thin shoulders.

"Well, I s'pose I missed him," he said ruefully, coming from behind the bar. "That's the first darned horsefly that ever bit me from behind and got away with it."

"Gittin' up on my bar and tryin' to hit a fly with a hat!" The bartender was justly indignant. "Where in hell do you fellers think this place is, anyway? Balancin' on your knees on top of my bar and——"

"Wait a minute," interrupted Sad. "If you think that anybody is intensely interested in yore recital, hire a hall. I'll betcha you've got a silv'ry voice, and all that, but not when yo're mad. Right now yuh kinda creak yore words."

"I've got a right to kick, ain't I?"

Sad leaned against the bar, his old sombrero pulled down over his left eye, his shirt collar hiked up around his ears, and squinted reflectively at the irate bartender.

"All right," he nodded. "Go ahead. But, brother, let not yore oration become personal. Use all the 'I's' yuh want to, but keep from sayin' 'you' as much as possible. Proceed."

But the bartender's vocabulary seemed to have oozed away; so he contented himself with picking up what few glasses Sad's heels had smashed when he fell off the bar in his efforts to swat a horsefly.

Sad Sontag was as lean as a grayhound,

bronzed as an Indian. His hair was sort of a washed-out sandy color, with one long lock extending down his forehead and joining one of his arched eyebrows, which gave him an habitual astonished expression.

Sad's shirt was of neutral shade; the color having long since faded from the sun and strong soap, his chaps worn and scarred, and his boot heels badly run over on the outer edges, which proved that Sad was bow-legged.

His cartridge belt was of extra width, molded by use to fit the curve of his hip and thigh, and from a scarred holster protruded the plain, black wood butt of a heavy Colt revolver.

Swede Harrigan, his partner, was a composite of Gaelic and Norse; a six foot six inch blond cowboy, with an Irish mouth and nose. His eyes were round and very blue; patient-looking eyes, which belied the nose and mouth below them. His raiment was on a par with that worn by Sad, except that his boot heels were slightly run over on the inner side, which proved that Swede was a little knock-kneed in spite of the fact that he had spent most of his life in a saddle.

They were a nondescript pair, these two cowpunchers; neither handsome nor gaudy. An experienced cattleman would probably pick them out of a crowd as being top-hand cowboys; but as far as appearances went they were merely two ordinary cowhands, no better nor worse than the average run.

Nor were they, except that they were joint owners of the TJ cattle outfit in the Sundown country, a hundred miles north of this town of Oreana. Oreana City, they called it, a cow town of a hundred and fifty inhabitants, and the county seat of Pipestone County.

The bartender cooled down considerably when he found that the damage was small, and offered to set up the drinks.

"Gimme a see-gar," said Sad seriously.

"I'll burn m' tongue, too," nodded Swede.

The bartender dug beneath the bar top and drew out a cigar box, which he dusted off and opened.

"Them," he said, tipping the box for a better view, "them is what I call cigars. They costs me three dollars per hundred. Ain't much call for cigars here."

"Hadn't ort to be," agreed Swede. "Prob'ly be less after this."

"It don't do no good to wet 'em thataway," declared the bartender. "I've done it a lot of times, but they won't stick."

Sad's cigar slipped from his fingers onto the floor, while Swede stumbled and broke his against the bar.

"I'll buy a drink of liquor," declared Sad, and added meaningly, "I hope yuh didn't try to make that stick."

"Aw-w-w-w, I didn't mean them cigars," protested the bartender. "I meant that I'd tried it with the ones I smoked."

"Yuh shore get lucid too late," said Swede sadly. "I never did see a bartender that wasn't about forty minutes late."

"Yeah? Well, I wasn't always a bartender."

"Yore work shows it," grinned Sad. "Well, here's how."

Swede grimaced and coughed.

"My gosh!" he gasped. "That's the first time I ever made a test-tube out of my insides. Hooh! I'll betcha that inside of fifteen minutes there won't be nothin' left of me except my ring and the case of my watch. Nitric acid!"

"Twenty years in the wood," declared the bartender.

"Ah-h-h-h-h!" Sad clung to the bar, gasping like a drowning man, his eyes closed painfully. The bartender had not yet taken his drink, and now he slid it beneath the bar and dumped it into the slack-tub, where he washed his glasses.

He sniffed at the bottles. It seemed to smell all right.

"It seems to be all right," he said.

"Yeah, it's all right, but it's got kind of a whisky taste," said Sad.

"My gosh, it is whisky!"

"It is?" Sad's eyebrows lifted incredulously. "Do you mean to tell me—ah, no, it cannot be!"

"He says it straight enough," said Swede seriously. He and Sad stared at each other wonderingly, turned together, stared at the bartender and went slowly out into the street; while the bartender rubbed his chin and wondered what on earth it was all about anyway.

Sad and Swede walked up the narrow sidewalk, their faces very solemn until they looked at each other and burst into laughter.

"Now that poor bartender'll wonder whether we're crazy or he is," chuckled Sad. "Didja see him ditch his drink, Swede?"

"Did I? Ha, ha, ha, ha! It's got a whisky taste!" Swede went into paroxisms of unholy glee.

They stopped near the entrance of a hall which led up to the county offices, and began perusing the assorted notices tacked

to the wall. Sad seemed interested in one particular notice which concerned a sheriff's sale.

"What day is this, Swede?" he asked.

"This is Monday, the seventh of August."

"Thasso? Huh! Say, when did that feller tell us that this here sale was to be pulled off?"

"On the ninth."

"Well, he lied several days," complained Sad. "Here's the notice, which says it'll be pulled off on the twelfth."

Swede moved over and squinted at the notice, which declared that on the twelfth day of August the sheriff of Pipestone county would sell at public auction everything belonging to the Bar S ranch. The sheriff had even gone to the trouble of drawing a pen design of the brand, which was a letter S, with a straight bar over the top.

"I reckon some of these Oreana folks can't read; so he has to draw a pitcher of it," grinned Swede. "Dang it, that makes it kinda bad for us, Sad. What'll we do?"

Sad scratched his head and squinted dismally.

"I dunno. I don't care to hive up in this place for very long, but we came here to see what we could buy at that sale; so we might as well stay here and see it through. What do yuh think?"

"I don't care. It's all right with me, if we can find somethin' to do around this town."

"All right, we'll stay, Swede. The first thing we better do is to put them broncs in a stable and find us a place to stay."

As they turned away from the bulletin-board a yellow dog shot around the corner, yelping as only a yellow dog can yelp, while behind it, tied securely to its tail, bounded a tin can.

For a fraction of a second the yellow dog hesitated as it turned the corner, and then it headed straight for Sad and Swede. The word "headed" is hardly descriptive of its speed. Afterward Swede swore that something drew a yellow streak from his feet to the corner, and then rubbed it out.

At any rate, the dog, running blindly, attempted to go between Swede's legs, which were slightly knock-kneed, and Swede flipped upside down, while the tin can whipped around his ankle, snapping the twine cord, and the yellow dog streaked away up the street, leaving Swede on his hands and knees, swearing just enough.

Immediately following the dog came a boy of about twelve, his freckled face streaked with dusty tears, his rusty hair rumpled belligerently. He stopped and looked at Swede, who was untangling the cord from around his boot. Sad grinned at the youngster, who came closer, crooking his neck to look past them.

"Where'd Boze go?" he drawled.

"Was that Boze?" asked Sad.

"Yeah." The kid scratched one of his bare feet and looked back.

"Yuh hadn't ort to tie cans on yore dog," said Swede.

"Aw-w-w, hell!" The youngster spat dryly and hitched up his ragged overalls. "I never done it. It was some of them dad-durned square-heads from the Box 8. By grab, if I ever git big enough I'll shore tie off to one of them pelicans and yank real hard."

"Aw, shucks!" Sad grew sympathetic. "Somebody pickin' on yuh, Bud?"

"Yeah—but my name ain't Bud. I'm Percival Cadwallader Steeb. Mostly everybody calls me 'Speck' Steeb. And," Speck sighed dismally and wiped his cheeks, "I ain't havin' good luck."

"Ain't yuh, Speck?" queried Swede.

"Nope. Me and Boze ran away from that derned Box 8 outfit."

"Are you livin' there, or jist punchin' cows for 'em?" asked Sad.

"Aw, I ain't big enough to be a 'hand' yet. They thought I was livin' there, but I ain't. And by the busted tail of a longhorn steer, I ain't goin' to live there neither. I'm through."

"A feller like you ort to pick and choose," nodded Swede.

An old man drove up and got out of his wagon in front of a store. His equipage consisted of a rickety buckboard and a pair of mismated horses. He was little short of seventy years of age, with a long, white beard and white hair. His face was seamed deeply and colored like an old parchment, which only accentuated the white of his beard and hair.

Three cowpunchers rounded the corner beyond the store and went inside, while the old man followed them in. Speck scowled at the three punchers.

"Them punchers is the jiggers from the Box 8 that tin canned Boze," he informed them. "Took all three of 'em to hawg-tie

me, y'betcha. That old man in the wagon is Eph Wyatt. He c'n whip his weight in anythin' yuh want to mention."

"Pretty old to be fightin', ain't he?" ventured Sad.

"Well, I dunno. Paw said that old Eph got fightener every year."

Sad laughed and patted the youngster on the shoulder.

"Some folks are that way, Speck," he said. "Where is yore father?"

Speck's eyes suddenly filled with tears and he shoved both hands down deep in his pockets.

Sad and Swede exchanged a quick glance, as Speck looked up at them and said, "Well, yuh see, he—he's dead now."

"Aw, gosh!" exploded Sad mournfully. "Yuh see, Speck, we didn't know about that."

"Thasall right," Speck smiled through his tears. "Folks never learn nothin' unless they ask questions. My dad owned the Bar S ranch."

"Oh, yeah," Sad nodded thoughtfully. "Well, ain't yuh got no relations, Speck? Nobody to look after yuh?"

"No-o-o," Speck sighed deeply. "Anyway, I dunno any. Pa wasn't much fer relations. Lot of these folks around here got to tryin' to figure out what to do with me, and I'll betcha some of 'em won't git the cramps out of their brains for a year.

"Bill Wyatt says he can use a boy about my size out at the Box 8; so they sends me out there. Bill's that old man's nephew, but he's owner of the Box 8. I stayed two days, and I'll tell a man I worked. Whooee! Bill hates Boze. Bill hates everythin', I reckon. Anyway, he run Boze off the ranch twice, but Boze comes back every time. Then Bill tells me to run the dog off the ranch and keep him off; so I run Boze plumb down here where," Speck grinned wisely, "where I can keep us both off."

"And then they come down here and tin can the dog, eh?" said Swede.

"Shore did. But Boze'll come back."

"That part's all right, but what about you?" asked Sad.

"Don't nobody need to worry about me," assured Speck.

"Uh-huh," Sad scratched his head thoughtfully. He admired the independent attitude of the youngster.

"I'll git along," remarked Speck. "All I ask is that they leave me and Boze alone. There's the little son-of-a-gun now."

Boze had ventured back to the corner beyond the store, and was peering around into the street. Speck whistled to the dog, which ran to meet him. Sad and Swede grinned at each other and walked to the store entrance, while the boy and dog romped farther up the street.

"Somebody's hot under the collar," observed Swede, as sounds of an argument from within the store greeted their entrance.

"I tell yuh, I don't want him around!" It was Bill Wyatt, a thin-faced, buck-toothed cowboy, speaking. He rowled his spurs savagely against the counter and spat accurately at a sawdust-filled box.

"That's all right."

This remark came ponderously from Al Weller, the big storekeeper.

"It was your own idea, Bill."

"Yeah, that's right," nodded Bill. "But I thought he'd be worth somethin'. Hell, he won't work!"

Old Eph Wyatt turned his head and squinted at his nephew.

"You wasn't payin' him no wages, was yuh, Bill?"

"Not so yuh could notice it."

"I didn't think yuh was, Bill. Yuh can hire men for forty a month, and yuh might stop long enough to remember that the kid ain't more'n twelve years old."

"I was givin' him a home," retorted Bill.

"You wasn't givin him nothin'—he had to earn one."

"There's no use quarrelin'," said the storekeeper quickly.

"I'm not quarrelin'," said the old man. "The poor kid got a tough deal all the way around. I liked Jim Steeb. He was a damn fool to drink himself to death, lose everythin' and throw the kid into a com-

munity that's got more kids than they know what to do with.

"Bill had an idea that he could git some cheap labor, I reckon. No, I ain't sayin' that a little work will hurt any kid, but a youngster like him hadn't ort to have to work twelve hours per day for his bed and three meals."

"I dunno yet jist why yo're hornin' into this," declared Bill.

His uncle squinted at Bill closely; so intently that the younger man shifted uneasily.

"You didn't think that I cared to explain, did yuh?" asked the old man slowly. "I ain't never been in the habit to apologizin' for hornin' into an argument, have I."

"Thasall right, Eph." The storekeeper was a trifle anxious.

"Well, I don't care what yuh do." Bill shrugged his shoulders and threw some silver on the counter.

"Gimme some smokin' and papers, Al."

As he pocketed the desired articles, Speck and Boze came in. The dog slouched at the boy's heels, recognizing its enemies, but Speck was unafraid. All conversation ceased, as the boy and dog came up to the group. Some of the men had noticed Sad and Swede, but the argument had been too interesting for them to pay much attention to a pair of strange cowboys.

"That dog don't know when to git insulted," laughed Bill.

"You let that dog alone," said Speck firmly. "He ain't never done nothin' to you, Bill Wyatt."

Bill laughed at Speck and started for Boze, who darted back toward the door, barking snappily.

"You let that dog alone!" shrilled Speck, blocking Bill. "By golly, some day I'll be big enough——"

But Speck's prophecy was not finished when Bill's open palm splatted against his ear, sending him sideways into the counter, and Bill started toward the frightened dog.

"You hadn't ought to do that." Sad Sontag stepped around the end of a display table between Bill and the dog. There was no threat in Sad's voice nor actions. He was smiling with his mouth, but his eyes were serious.

"Hadn't, eh?" Bill stopped and looked Sad over curiously. It was the first time he had ever seen this strange cowpuncher. Then he turned his head and looked at Swede, who was lounging easily against a counter, paying no attention to what Sad was doing, because his entire attention centered on the two men who had come in with Bill Wyatt.

Bill's eyes came back to Sad.

"What's the idea of you hornin' into this?" he demanded.

"I ain't hornin' in," smiled Sad. "I was just tellin' yuh."

Boze seemed to realize that the immediate danger was over, so he came over and sniffed at Sad's boots. Speck had regained his feet, and was busily rubbing a very red ear. Bill looked back at his two men and found them centering their attention on Swede.

"And," said Sad softly, "any man that would slap kids and tie cans on a pup's tail is a low bred coyote."

The storekeeper ducked low behind the counter, and the old man edged slowly out of line with the two men. They knew that Bill Wyatt was deadly with a six-shooter, and that there could be but one answer to that insult.

Still Bill Wyatt did not move. His half-closed eyes looked into the wide open gray ones of Sad Sontag, which seemed to hypnotize him. Neither of them had made any motion toward a gun.

"A feller that would hit a kid ain't got the guts to fight." Sad's voice was pitched low, but carried clearly. "You might fight, if yuh was in a corner—but I doubt it."

But Bill Wyatt did not move. Sad inched toward him, coming closer and closer. One of Bill's men swore softly, wonderingly. They could not see Bill's face.

Suddenly Sad's left hand shot out, grasped the brim of Bill's sombrero and yanked it down over Bill's eyes. It was done so quickly that Bill did not have time to jerk away, and he stumbled forward from the pull.

But the hypnotic spell was broken. Bill ripped out a foul oath, as he flung back the hat and flipped out his gun; but the barrel of Sad's struck him across the right wrist, forcing him to drop his gun, and the next instant he measured his full length under the table from a left swing which caught him full in the ear.

"Glory to gosh!" whooped Speck. "Right in the ear!"

Bill's two men had not moved during the fight, for the simple reason that the blond-headed Swede still leaned against the counter, dangling a big six-shooter in his right

hand, his lips puckered in a whistle, while his round blue eyes never wavered.

Sad kicked Bill's gun aside and waited for him to get up; but Bill was in no great hurry. He slid from under the table, rubbing his swelling ear and seemed inclined to wonder what it was all about.

"You know now how it feels to get hit in the ear, don'tcha?" chuckled Speck. "Mebbe next time you'll have a little sense."

Bill got slowly to his feet and walked out of the store, while Abe Snow and "Snipe" Lee, his two men, followed him out. They gave Swede a wide berth in passing.

"And thus endeth that chapter," smiled Sad.

"Mebbe not," said old Eph Wyatt dubiously. "My nephew Bill won't forget it for a mighty long time, stranger."

"Memories has caused a lot of folks to lose their minds," grinned Sad, rumpling Speck's hair and feeling of his ear.

"Aw, it don't hurt now," protested Speck. "The wallop you gave Bill Wyatt cured me. Whooee, I'll betcha he's sore!"

A man was coming into the store, but turned to look across at the hitchrack, where the three men from the Box 8 were mounting. It was Buck Rainey, the sheriff, a short, heavy-set individual, with a yellow mustache and squinty eyes.

He came on in, glanced casually at Sad and Swede and spoke to the others.

"You missed a circus, Buck," said Eph Wyatt, whose feelings in regard to his nephew were well known. "Bill jist got knocked cold."

"Yeah?" The sheriff elevated his eyebrows. "How come, Eph?"

The old man laughed and detailed the story, while the sheriff stroked his mustache and considered Sad and Swede.

"And he popped him right in the ear," added Speck jubilantly.

"Uh-huh." The sheriff scratched his nose thoughtfully. "It's a wonder that Bill didn't start shootin'."

"It's got me beat," said the storekeeper. "He jist stood and took it. I don't sabe Bill."

"Is he supposed to be a bad man?" asked Sad.

"Well," drawled the sheriff, "a feller don't have to be so awful darned bad to reach for a gun at a time like that."

"I don't think he's got brains enough to know when he's been insulted," laughed Swede.

"Mebbe not," the sheriff grinned. "But Bill is usually the one to start trouble."

"Mebbe I packed it to him too fast," grinned Sad. "You're the sheriff, ain't yuh?"

"Yeah."

"I'm Sontag. My pardner's name is Harrigan. We own a ranch in the Sundown country, and we're down here to see what we can buy at that Bar S sale."

"Oh, yeah. Pleased to meetcha. Bar S sale, eh? Uh- hu- u- uh. What didja figure on buyin'?"

"Mebbe a few head of stock. We heard that there was quite a bunch of cattle and horses."

"Yeah? Well, it won't be held until the twelfth."

"That's all right. We got some wrong information and come down too soon."

The sheriff turned to Eph Wyatt and the storekeeper.

"I've been wonderin' what we're goin' to do with this kid." He pointed at Speck, who was perched on a counter. "Bill said he'd take care of him, but that's all off now, I suppose. Makes it bad for the kid."

"I wish you'd quit worryin' about me," said Speck. "I ain't askin' for nothin' but a job. I c'n work my way along."

"You ain't big enough to work," declared the sheriff. "Your place is in school."

"How'd yuh like to work for me?" asked the old man.

"Huh! I dunno," Speck wriggled his toes. "Me and you'd prob'ly get along fine, Mr. Wyatt. Dad said you was the fightenest son-of-a-gun he ever seen—and I like to fight, too."

The old man laughed softly and walked over to Speck.

"Fightin' don't git yuh much, Speck. I'm all alóne on that old ranch out there, and I sure need somebody to help me. Suppose yuh come out and live with me."

"Well—". Speck hesitated. "Well, I'll do it."

"He ain't big enough to do much work," said the sheriff.

"No, and he won't have much to do." Eph Wyatt turned to the sheriff. "I'll

take him out there with me jist the same. If me and him gits along all right, I'll—I'll adopt him accordin' to law."

"You'll adopt him?"

"I shore will. Ain't no law ag'in it, is there, Buck?"

"Sure ain't, Eph."

"What does adoptin' mean?" asked Speck.

"Takin' out papers to make yuh the same as my son," explained the old man.

"Yea-a-a-ah?" Speck's eyes widened. "What about Boze?"

"Well, he comes along," laughed the old man. "We won't need no papers for the pup. C'mon."

The old man started for the door, with the boy and the pup close behind him. At the doorway Speck turned and came back to Sad, holding out his hand.

"Much obliged, Mr. Sontag," he said. "Hope to meetcha ag'in."

"Yo're shore welcome, Speck," laughed Sad as they shook hands. "I hope yore luck has turned."

"She's beginnin' to bend a little," grinned Speck. "S'long."

They watched Speck climb up on the seat beside the old man, while Boze danced around in the rear of the buckboard and barked his approval of the equipage.

"Well, I hope it works out all right," said the sheriff. "It sure was hard to find out what to do with that kid."

"What killed his father?" asked Swede.

"Liquor. He spent most of his time at the Oreana saloon. It was too danged bad. Jim Steeb wasn't a bad sort of a feller. His wife died a year ago, and it kinda ruined him. This ain't exactly a sheriff's sale. Yuh see, 'Bunty' O'Neil, who owns the Oreana saloon, has enough of Steeb's notes to probably cover everythin' on the Bar S."

"Steeb just drank up his ranch, eh?" queried Sad.

"Uh-huh. There may be a little over, after O'Neil gets paid, but I doubt it. I've got three men in the hills now, roundin' up the Bar S stock."

"What sort of a person is Bill Wyatt?"

"Bill Wyatt? Well, he's all right, I reckon. Bill's kinda touchy, and ain't noways honey-flavored, yuh know. He owns the Box 8 outfit and runs quite a lot of stock. That old Eph Wyatt is his uncle. Old Eph is a cantankerous old reptile, but he's good-hearted. I dunno how him and the kid will hit it off together."

"Is Bill Wyatt married?"

"Naw."

"Owned the Box 8 very long?"

"Couple of years."

"Buy out a brand, or register his own?"

"Registered his own. Used to be the 8 outfit; so he changed it to the Box 8. Say, what's the idea of all these questions?"

"Curiosity, thasall, Sheriff," laughed Sad. "Nice weather we're havin'."

"Uh-hu-u-uh." The sheriff walked down the street toward his office, where three men were dismounting, while Sad and Swede went in the opposite direction, looking for a place to call home for a few days.

II

BUNTY O'NEIL of the Oreana saloon was not what you would call a lovable character. He was of medium height, thick of neck and broad of shoulder. His face was blocky, expressionless, swarthy; a hard-headed individual, whose bunting practice in a fight had given him his nickname. He would grasp an opponent with his huge hands, yank him forward and butt him with his head. Only in rare cases did Bunty fail to put his opponent *hors de combat*. It was an unlooked for move, except where Bunty's system was well known.

Bunty had once worked it successfully on Bill Wyatt. Bill had wakened up about fifteen minutes later and found that both of his eyes were of a purple tint and did not admit much light. He had waited for the swelling to go down, had walked up behind Bunty in the Oreana saloon and crowned him with the barrel of a six-shooter.

Bunty had had six stitches taken in his scalp, and had sent word to Bill Wyatt to keep out of the Oreana. Bill did. This had happened six months prior to Sad and Swede's coming to Oreana, but Bill had never been in the place since. Yet Bill had known Bunty in the northern part of the state, and it was Bill who had induced Bunty to come to Oreana and buy out the Oreana saloon and gambling house.

Just now Bunty and the sheriff were standing on the porch of the saloon, talking seriously. It was the day after Sad and Swede had come to Oreana.

"You say they brought in three hundred and ten head?" asked Bunty. The sheriff nodded.

"Yeah. They're in the old pasture at the Bar S. The boys have gone down into the lower ranges now, but they won't be able to round up everythin' for a couple

days. There's enough feed in the pasture for a few days."

"That's good." Bunty smiled contentedly. "Three hundred and ten head, eh? Mebbe I'll get my money after all, Buck."

"I reckon yuh will, Bunty. For gosh sake, how much money did Jim Steeb owe yuh, anyway?"

Bunty grinned widely and shook his head.

"Jim plunged quite a lot, Buck. His whisky bill ain't more than a few hundred, but his faro and poker playin' sure cost money. I reckon the notes he gave me will come close to ten thousand."

The sheriff whistled his amazement.

"As much as that, Bunty? Huh! Yuh know," the sheriff squinted thoughtfully; "yuh know, it seems too darned bad. Jim went through all that money and didn't leave a darned thing for the kid. Old Eph Wyatt is goin' to adopt him, I think."

"Old Eph?" Bunty laughed. "Goin' to adopt him, eh? Well, well!"

Just then Sad and Swede came out of the hotel and sauntered toward the general store.

"They tell me that one of them fellers took a fall out of Bill Wyatt," said Bunty thoughtfully.

"The skinny one. They're down here to buy some stock at the sale. The skinny one's name is Sontag and the other is Harrigan. Seem like a salty pair of fellers. Sontag tells me that they own a ranch in the Sundown country."

"Well, all I care about it is to get my money out of the deal, Buck."

They went into the saloon, as Sad and Swede crossed the street, following them inside. The sheriff greeted them warmly and introduced them to Bunty as the owner of the Oreana. There was little activity in the place and the day was warm.

"You interested in the Bar S sale?" asked Bunty.

Sad nodded. "Kinda. We're lookin' for some stock, and thought this might be a chance to buy some reasonable. Course we don't want a lot of runts."

"We might take a ride out to the Bar S this evenin'," suggested the sheriff. "The boys threw three hundred and ten head into the pasture last night, and it might help yuh some to look 'em over."

"We'd sure appreciate the chance," agreed Sad.

THEY spent the rest of the day, loafing in the shade, and did not start for the Bar S until late in the afternoon. It was five miles to the ranch, located northeast of Oreana. The ranch buildings were badly in need of repair, but it was easy to see that at one time the Bar S had been considerable of a ranch.

There was no one at the place, and the sheriff explained that there had been no one in charge since the death of Steeb. They rode out past the corrals and on to a knoll that furnished a view of the Bar S pasture, which contained about a hundred acres.

But there were no cattle in sight. The sheriff gnawed his mustache and squinted around wonderingly.

"'S funny," he muttered. "They were here last night."

"Are yuh sure this is the place?" asked Swede.

"Am I sure? I'm jist as sure as anythin'," replied the sheriff and spurred his horse off the knoll.

They rode to the lower end of the pasture, and it did not take them long to find where the barb-wires had been cut, and about a hundred feet of them ripped off the posts.

"They knowed how to do it," observed Sad. "They cut the wires, bunched the ends, tied 'em to a rope and jist rode 'em loose."

"And let the whole herd drift," observed the sheriff. "Well, that's jist plumb meanness, I'd say."

Sad looked at the sheriff and grinned softly.

"Sheriff, do you think that they just turned them cows loose?"

"Eh?" The sheriff's eyebrows lifted slightly. "Yuh don't think that anybody would try to rustle a herd like that, do yuh?"

"Why not?"

"Well, I dunno. Yuh can't git away with that many. Anybody would be a fool to try and steal a herd like that."

"All right," Sad grinned widely and turned his horse. "You know the morals of this country better than we do."

They rode back to Oreana and stabled their horses. The sheriff was very thoughtful during the ride, but could hardly bring himself to believe that anyone would try and steal three hundred and ten head of cattle in one herd.

"I think that someone is jist doin' it to be mean," he declared.

"And I think they're doin' it for profit," laughed Sad.

It did not take the sheriff long to impart the story to Bunty O'Neil, who swore under his breath and questioned them closely. The sheriff told Bunty what he thought about it, but Bunty did not agree.

"They've had about twenty-four hours start," observed Bunty. "And yuh can move a big herd a long ways in that length of time. It's so dry in the hills that yuh couldn't trail a herd; so the best yuh can do is to trust to luck."

"It kinda looks like we might as well go home," observed Swede. "No use of us stayin' here, if there ain't no cows for sale."

Bunty's eyes grew hard as he leaned on the bar and toyed with his glass. The sheriff cleared his throat and sent his glass spinning down the bar.

"Bunty has got a lot of notes against the Bar S," he explained. "And if there ain't no cows—Bunty loses."

"That's the how of it, eh?" said Sad.

"Yeah, that's the how of it," said Bunty angrily. "And I'll get them cows—or get somethin'."

"You've got sort of an idea who took 'em, ain't yuh?" asked Sad.

"How would I?" snapped Bunty.

"I dunno how yuh would—I'm no mind-reader," and Sad walked away from the bar and grew interested in a poker game.

Bunty looked after him, an angry glint in his eyes, but said nothing until Swede walked away.

"What did he mean, Buck?" he then asked.

The sheriff shook his head. "I dunno. I hope the boys show up tomorrow, but I'm scared they won't. We've got to try and find them missin' cattle, that's a cinch. I don't believe yet that anybody had the nerve to try and steal a herd that big."

The sheriff left the saloon, but Bunty remained at the bar, drinking his own liquor. It was not often that Bunty drank heavily. Liquor made him quarrelsome. Several patrons steered clear of the bar and had their drinks served at a table, when they realized that Bunty was on a spree.

Bunty leaned across the bar and motioned the bartender closer.

"What did that skinny puncher mean?" he demanded.

"The skinny one? I dunno what he said, Bunty. Personally, I think he's crazy. The damn fool fell off the bar yesterday, tryin' to hit a horsefly with his hat. And they said that there was whisky in the drinks we served here. What are they—e-vangelists?"

Bunty grunted an oath and reached for the bottle. Sad and Swede were coming toward the bar, heading for the door. Bunty stepped in front of Sad and motioned them to stop and drink with him.

"Yuh ain't in no hurry, are yuh?" he growled.

"Not a bit," grinned Sad.

"I'm glad yuh ain't—'cause you'd stop anyway."

Sad glanced keenly at Bunty. He realized that the other was angry over something, and that he might be a hard man to handle.

"I'm not buyin' yuh any drinks," Bunty informed them harshly. "I only buy drinks for my friends."

"Then have a drink on me," grinned Sad.

"No, I won't do that, either." Bunty moved in closer to Sad.

"I want to know what wuh mean by that remark a while ago—about yuh not bein' a mind reader."

"Oh!" Sad squinted thoughtfully. "Well, I'm not, Bunty. I'll leave it to Swede if I am."

"You'll leave nothin' to nobody! C'mere!"

Bunty grasped Sad by the shoulders, sinking his powerful fingers deeply into the flesh. It was the prelude to crashing the top of his head into Sad's face—and Sad realized it.

But Bunty did not work fast enough. With a sudden shift of his feet, Sad kicked Bunty in the shins so hard that the hotelman forgot everything except the excruciating pain. His hands jerked loose and he reached for his shins just in time to get Sad's fist square in his nose, with the full swinging weight of the wiry cowpuncher behind it.

The blow straightened Bunty back onto his heels, and before he could catch his balance Sad was into him, smashing with both hands to the head, and Bunty went reeling across the room to crash into the back of a poker player's chair and go flat on his back.

At least a dozen men had seen the whole affair. They had expected Bunty to butt the face almost off this thin cowpuncher and end the fight to suit himself. But they had reckoned without Sad Sontag, who now was standing against the bar, blowing on his sore knuckles and grinning widely.

There was little commotion. A couple of men picked Bunty up and half-dragged him to the rear of the room, where they could wash him off, the poker player adjusted his chair and the games went on.

Sad and Swede went back to the hotel, where Sad procured some hot water in which to bathe his swollen right hand. Swede became pessimistic.

"Aw, let's go home," he argued dismally. "You've whipped both of their best fighters. This here town kinda palls upon me, Sad, and I'd crave to ride home."

"I've had a pretty fair time," said Sad seriously, examining his knuckles. "I s'pose Bunty was aimin' to butt me in the face, wasn't he?"

"That's his style," agreed Swede wearily. "There ain't no cows to be bought; so we might as well start home t'morrow."

"It's a funny thing about them stolen cows," observed Sad, as he stretched out on the bed and began rolling a cigarette. "I'll betcha anythin' that Bunty knows who stole 'em. Somebody knows that Bunty has notes against the Bar S; so they crimped his chances to collect by stealin' the whole danged herd.

"There's somebody who hates Bunty quite a lot, Swede. It ain't no little job to steal three hundred head of cattle. Mebbe they just done it to aggravate the sheriff, or Bunty."

"Then yuh think they'll have enough stock for us to wait for the sale?"

"Yuh never can tell," Sad blew smoke rings at the dingy ceiling. "I've got a hunch that they won't. Tomorrow we'll find out more about it, and if it don't look more promisin' we'll rattle our hocks out of Oreana. I've had all the fightin' I want, y'betcha."

"We might ride out past old Eph Wyatt's place," suggester Swede. "I'm kinda curious to know how the old man and the kid are comin' along."

"Yeah, we'll do that, Swede. I'm curious about that kid myself. Somehow I've got a hunch that the kid ain't had a square deal."

"Just how do yuh mean, Sad?"

"Aw, just kinda mind readin', I reckon."

III

IT WAS the following morning at Eph Wyatt's ranch-house that Speck Steele, the freckle-faced boy leaned against the doorway and rubbed a sore jaw. Sitting on the edge of the step was old Eph Wyatt, busily engaged in cleaning a Winchester rifle; while the dog, Boze, chased a rooster across the yard, his mouth filled with feathers.

The old man stuffed cartridges into the loading gate, levered a shell into the chamber of the rifle and handed it to Speck, who took it gingerly and squatted down on the step.

"Pull a little finer, son," advised the old man. "Them last two shots went six inches high."

Speck cuddled the stock against his shoulder, resting the heavy barrel between his knees. The old man's eyes squinted closely at Speck's trigger finger, which tightened slowly, surely; and the big caliber rifle shook Speck from head to heels.

From down back of the stable, a tin can flipped off a corral post and went spinning into the brush. Speck blinked painfully, but a grin wreathed his lips, when he noted that the can was not on the post.

"Pretty good!" chuckled the old man "Pretty good!"

"Pretty good, hell!" snorted Speck indignantly. "That's perfect."

"Yeah, I'll betcha it is," agreed the old man. "Any old time a little kid can hit a tin can at a hundred yards with a 45-90, it's jist a little better than perfect. How's the shoulder?"

"Jist' like a blamed boil. Geemighty, I never knowed a rifle could kick thataway."

"And yuh squeezed the trigger, too," applauded the old man. "Yuh knowed it was goin' to kick, but yuh had the nerve to pull slow. Speck, me and you are goin' to git along, y'betcha. Well, that ends the first lesson."

The old man put the gun in the house and came back to the porch.

"We're goin' to town," he decided. "We'll hook onto a lawyer feller and have him fix up the papers—if yuh don't mind, Speck."

Speck rubbed his shoulder reflectively.

"Yuh mean the papers that make me your son?"

"Yeah."

Speck squinted up at the old man thoughtfully.

"Why are yuh doin' this, Mr. Wyatt? I ain't nothin' to you."

"Why?" The old man looked out across the hills, shading his eyes from the sun. "Well, mebbe it's 'cause I kinda like yuh, son. I'm gittin' old, I s'pose. And livin' alone don't make yuh stay young. I ain't got no livin' relation, except Bill Wyatt, and," he hesitated for a moment before he looked down at Speck, "I've allus been quite a hand for relatives."

"And that's all the reasons yuh got, Mr. Wyatt?"

"Well, that's all I care to speak about."

"Uh-huh." Speck bobbed his head wisely. "Well, I can stand it, if you can." He got to his feet and held out his hand. "Shake, pardner."

They shook hands gravely. It was a solemn pact between two old men; two of the fightenest sons-of-guns in the Oreana country.

They went to the stable, harnessed the mismated horses to the old buckboard and drove up to the house, where the old man got the rifle and leaned it against the seat between them.

As they drove away the old man looked back at the house and said, "Speck, I reckon we'll have to fix up the old place a little now. I've kinda let her drift for the last few years, 'cause there wasn't no object in havin' it handled right. I've got a right smart of cows in them hills. It ain't took much for my keep. When I needed money I'd sell a handful of critters.

"This here Diamond W has got the best water-holes in this country, and it shore could be made into a fine ranch. The old house needs fixin' a lot, and the barn's swaybacked. Some day a wind will come along and blow the corral away, I s'pose. But we'll fix her all up now."

The old man chuckled and slapped Speck on the back.

"By golly, son, we'll show 'em, eh?"

"Danged right," nodded Speck.

They drove down through a brushy swale and around the point of a ridge, where a long line of cottonwoods angled up through a narrow canyon. The road was rutty and the horses were traveling at a slow walk, when the larger of the two beasts lurched sideways and went down in a tangle.

Almost at the same moment the report of a rifle broke the stillness. The other horse reared wildly, swung over the body of its mate and fell back against the buckboard, squealing and kicking. The shock of it all caused Speck to stand up, clinging to the back of the seat, and the next moment he was picked up by the old man and hurled bodily into a clump of brush beside the road.

And while Speck was still in the air the old man grasped the rifle and started to jump, but a bullet shocked him heavily and he went down sideways, falling just outside the wheels. Boze had jumped from the rear of the buckboard and scuttled into the brush, as though he knew what was taking place.

Speck landed in the brush head-first, but managed to extricate himself quickly and crawl back to the old man, whose hair and beard were already dyed with crimson. Speck's eyes were wide with fright, but his jaw was clenched tightly, as he clawed the rifle from between the wheels and ducked back into the brush.

"Gosh a'mighty!" he panted. "Bushwhacked, by jing!"

He remained quiet long enough to calm his breathing. One horse was dead, the other down in a tangle of harness, unable to get up. Speck rubbed his nose and considered his predicament. From where he squatted he was unable to see anything of the surrounding country, so he crawled back through the brush until he could get on higher ground.

He felt reasonably sure that the shooter had been hidden in that line of cottonwoods, and that they, or he, would try and get a close view of the buckboard to see just what they had accomplished.

Working further up the side of the swale he found a good spot to wait. It gave him a fairly good view of the surrounding country, although he could not see the buckboard. He could see Boze far down the road, hunting for gophers.

Suddenly he saw two riders emerge from a thicket on the right-hand side of the cottonwoods. They were going cautiously, and it seemed to Speck that they were intent on seeing what was down the road. The brush was horse-high; so he was unable to identify their horses.

They were about three hundred yards away, when Speck raised the sights on his rifle and rested it across a limb. It did not occur to him that he was about to shoot at a human being. They were the ones who had shot his benefactor, and he was going to repay them in kind. He flinched from the pressure of the rifle butt against his

sore shoulder, but he gritted his teeth and muttered, "Squeeze, dang yuh—don't yank!"

The big rifle crashed the silence and the black powder fumes drifted back into Speck's wide open mouth. He coughed slightly and dropped lower, his lips grimacing disgustedly.

"Yuh yanked!" he said aloud in self accusation. "Yuh darned fool, yuh yanked. Why didn't yuh squeeze? Yanked, and jerked the sight plumb off to the right."

He could not see the two riders now, but he felt sure that the smoke from his shot had disclosed his hiding place; so he began crawling further up the canyon, going toward where he had seen the two riders.

Speck was wise enough to feel that they would not expect him to come toward them. He gained the cottonwoods and waited. There was not a sound, except the rustling of the trees. Far up the canyon a magpie squawked, sounding almost human.

Speck ducked low and followed the trees, stopping every few yards to listen. Then he left the cottonwoods and made his way around through the brush. He, too, wanted to get a view of what might be down at the buckboard.

Suddenly he stopped short, his mouth open in amazement. He had found the two horses. They had been left in a choke-cherry thicket, almost in the same spot where they had been when Speck shot at the riders. He spoke softly to the horses, worked his way past them, but was unable to get a glimpse of the road.

"Ding dang such luck!" he grumbled. "Feller never knows what will happen next in this Western country." He had heard his father use that expression many times, and it seemed applicable to his present predicament.

"Well," he decided philosophically, "the least I can do is to git help."

He went back to the horses, selected the smaller of the two, a blaze-faced roan, and managed to get into the saddle, but lost his rifle in the attempt. Cautiously he worked the horse back through the brush, swung along the side of the hill for about a quarter of a mile before turning back toward the road.

He managed to get his feet hooked in above the stirrups, which gave him a secure seat in the saddle, and in this manner, with his rusty hair standing almost on end and his skinny elbows beating a tattoo on his ribs, he headed swiftly toward Oreana.

Meanwhile down at the buckboard stood Sad and Swede, looking down at old Eph Wyatt, propped against a wheel. The old man's face and beard were well streaked with gore, which he mopped away with Sad's handkerchief.

"Think it's deep enough to amount to anythin'?" asked Swede.

"Don't hurt much," said the old man. "I feel kinda numb, that's all. By gosh, that shore was a close call, gents. It bumped me so darned hard I never even knowed when it hit."

"Where do yuh reckon the kid went?" queried Sad.

"I dunno. I throwed him into the brush after the team went down."

"Prob'ly high-tailed it for parts unknown," laughed Swede.

"Not that kid." The old man spoke with conviction. "Speck ain't the runnin' kind. And he took the rifle. Say, I don't think I'm hurt much." He got to his feet and clung to the wheel. "Kinda dizzy and m' head aches a little. Gittin' too old to stand many tunks on the head like that."

"Got any idea who shot yuh?" asked Sad.

"Nope."

"Uh-huh," Sad nodded seriously. "We can start by eliminatin' yore friends. Who hates yuh the worst?"

"The worst?" Old Eph squinted painfully. "Well, I dunno. Yuh see, I ain't got no friends; so yuh don't need to eliminate anybody. I wish I knowed where that kid went. If anybody hurts him I'll shore make 'em run fast and jump high."

"You've got two good little assistants, old timer," grinned Sad. "We kinda like Speck, too. Do yuh want to find out who shot yuh?"

"Do I?" The old man laughed wearily. "Yo're danged right I do."

"All right," grinned Sad. "Mebbe we can find out, if we work real fast. Swede, you go and collect the horses."

And while Swede went after the horses Sad untangled the uninjured horse and helped it to its feet. But he did not unhitch it from the buckboard. In a few minutes Swede came back, riding Sad's bay horse, and carrying Eph Wyatt's rifle.

"My bronc was gone," he told them," and they left this here rifle in its place."

Sad grinned and rubbed his nose violently.

"Looks like the work of a pack-rat, Swede. They always trade somethin'." He turned to the old man. "Speck's all right. He just out-smarted us, thasall, and swiped a horse. We've got to hurry

before Oreana descends upon us in a gob, and we've only got one piece or rollin' stock; so you get aboard, old timer."

"Shucks, I can walk," protested the old man.

"Yo're supposed to be dead," grinned Sad. "And the dead don't walk. Climb on."

IV

SPECK STEEB'S entrance into Oreana was unceremonious. He drew up at the door of the Oreana saloon and fairly fell from his saddle.

Buck Rainey, the sheriff, and "Wheezer" Wilson, his deputy, were crossing the street, and it was to them that Speck blurted his news.

"Git yore breath, boy," advised the sheriff, taking Speck by the arm. "C'mon inside and tell it."

He led Speck inside the Oreana, where he had an interested audience. It did not take Speck long to give them the details.

"Well, whose horse did yuh ride?" asked Wheezer.

They ran outside and inspected the panting horse.

"She's a TJ brand," declared Wheezer.

"Belongs to that feller named Swede Harrigan," remarked the livery-stable keeper excitedly. "They took their horses out early this mornin'."

"And one of them fellers shot old Eph Wyatt, eh?" Bunty O'Neil seemed pleased.

"Was the old man dead?" questioned the sheriff.

"Shot through the head," declared Speck. "Blood was runnin' all over him. I took a shot at them two jiggers, and—say, are them the two—one of 'em that busted Bill Wyatt?"

"They're the little vi'lets," stated Snipe Lee, who was the only one of Bill Wyatt's men in town. "I said to Bill——"

"Write it out and mail it to us," snapped the sheriff. "Get yore horses, boys. We'll find out more about this deal. C'mon, Wheezer. Anybody that ain't got guns can get one at my office."

Speck sat down on the saloon steps and rested his head in his hands, realizing that he had incriminated those two men who had befriended him. In the novelty of living at the Diamond W ranch with the old man he had forgotten these two strange cowboys. He wondered dully if they had killed Eph Wyatt, and why. Men were mounting at the hitch-racks, and a few moments later the sheriff and deputy rode out through a narrow alley and joined the others.

Speck got wearily to his feet and went back to the TJ horse. He would go along and show them where the thing had happened, and in some way he might be of assistance to those two strange cowboys. Anyway, he decided that he would not show them where he had found the horses.

He mounted and rode along with the others, who questioned him closely; but Speck was close-mouthed now.

"Yuh say yuh took a shot at 'em?" queried Snipe.

"I took a shot at somebody," qualified Speck. "I never named no names, did I?"

"But yuh saw 'em both, didn't yuh?" asked Bunty.

"I seen two men," stated Speck. "I dunno how they was dressed nor what they looked like."

"And that was one of their horses, eh?"

"I never said it was. My gosh, you fellers talk like I had said who killed Eph Wyatt. I found this horse, thasall."

"You found two horses," corrected the sheriff.

"Did I?" Speck grew indignant. "Who found this horse—me or you?"

"All right, kid," laughed the sheriff. "We ain't askin' yuh no more questions. I reckon this won't be hard to figure out."

"Not if yuh can find out why," said Speck gloomily.

Buck Rainey lifted his head and looked intently at Speck.

"That's about the most intelligent thing I've heard said since the kid told his story. There's usually a reason."

They rode around the point of a hill and down into the big swale, where they drew rein beside the buckboard. One of the horses was on its feet, trying to crop all the grass within reach, but there was no sign of the dead man.

They dismounted and examined the surroundings. Beside the left front wheel of the buckboard was a puddle of blood, and there were streaks of blood on the spokes of the wheel.

"That's danged queer," observed the sheriff. "Kinda looks like the old man had e-vaporated."

They separated and searched both sides of the road, but there was no sign of the

corpse. One of the men unharnessed the horse and turned it loose.

"Mebbe the old man was only hurt, and went home," suggested one of the men.

"Ain't no boot tracks," objected Wheezer, who had already investigated. "Of course he might 'a' cut across the hills."

"And fought brush all the way?" The sheriff was not in favor of that theory. "Well, he ain't here," he went on. "Ask the kid where he found that horse."

But Speck was rather vague. He studied the country seriously.

"I think I was over there," pointing across the swale. "No, I don't think I was either. Them horses were somewhere over by them cottonwoods, I think. Danged if I can be sure of anythin'."

"Kinda got buck-fever, eh?" laughed Snipe.

"Put yourself in his place," said the sheriff. "He's just a kid. I'd probably get rattled, too. Well, I dunno what to do. Suppose we ride over to the Diamond W?"

"If he got there, he flew," said Wheezer.

"Flyin' ain't hard, if yuh know how," said the sheriff.

"Well, he didn't know how, that's a cinch," declared Wheezer.

"Didja ever ask him, Wheezer?"

"No-o-o, I never."

"Then don't jump at conclusions. Let's go."

They mounted and rode to the Diamond W, scanning the country closely for any sign of the old man. The dusty road would have showed imprints of boots, if anyone had walked thereon, but there was nothing but the tracks of four-footed animals and wagon-wheels.

The posse rode in at the Diamond W ranch and lost no time in searching the place, but to no avail. It did not take them long to convince themselves that Eph Wyatt had not come home.

"Well, the next thing is to find Sontag and Harrigan," said the sheriff. "If that is one of their horses, and if the kid did find it where he said he did, they ought to know somethin' about this deal."

"I've just been thinkin'," said Wheezer. "Don't the law say that you've got to produce the body before yuh can make out a case of murder against anybody?"

"It sure does," agreed the seheriff.

"And if these two fellers did kill him, and was afraid that they'd get caught—couldn't they hide the body?" went on the deputy.

The sheriff removed his hat and scratched his head thoughtfully. "Wheezer, yore head *is* somethin' besides a hat-rack. Huh!" he said, turning to gaze across the miles of brushy hills. "Yore theory is a dinger, I like the idea fine, but yuh didn't go far enough with it. I could hide a dozen corpses out in them hills. We might arrest 'em on suspicion, feed 'em a week or so and turn 'em loose again."

So they rode back to Oreana, with Speck trailing behind, and found Sad and Swede sitting on the sidewalk in front of the Oreana saloon, talking with two of the sheriff's men, who had been on the lower ranges looking for Bar S cattle.

The posse dismounted before the arrival of Speck, who paled slightly at sight of the two men he had incriminated. Neither Sad nor Swede had paid any attention to the group of riders, but both got to their feet as Speck rode up.

Swede grinned at Speck and looked the horse over.

"I was wonderin' who got my bronc," he said smiling up at the youngster. "Pretty good ridin' horse, ain't he, Speck?"

"Jist fine," replied Speck hoarsely. "The stirrups was too long, that's all."

"Uh-huh. You must 'a' made a hit with Blaze. Ordinarily he don't care for everybody."

"When did yuh lose this horse?" asked the sheriff.

"Today," Swede smiled widely.

"Where?"

"I dunno," Swede scratched his head thoughtfully. "Yuh see, we ain't familiar with this country, sheriff. Me and Sad was taking a little ride through the hills, and we hears somebody bangin' away. Yuh see, we sabe that the deer season ain't open yet; so we opines that it might be a personal matter.

"We're goin' along kinda easy-like, tryin' to see what it means, when a bullet buzzes past my nose. It shore looks like we've horned into somethin'; so we dismounts, leads the horses into a patch of brush, and goes on a hunt for the jigger that shot at us.

"Anyway, we don't find him. We goes back to the horses and finds one of 'em gone. And whoever took my bronc left a good Winchester rifle in its place—kinda like a pack-rat would—so we

took the rifle, doubled up on Sad's bronc and came to town to find the sheriff."

The posse shuffled its feet and looked at one another, while Speck heaved a deep sigh of relief.

"That's a pretty good story," observed Snipe Lee, Bill Wyatt's hand.

Swede squinted closely at Snipe, a grin on his lips.

"I thought it was," he said slowly. "Anyway, it'll have to do until we can think of a better one."

The sheriff chewed at the corner of his mustache and wondered what to do next. Swede's story sounded plausible. It tallied with the one Speck had told.

"Mr. Wyatt, the old man, got shot today," volunteered Speck.

"The old man who was goin' to adopt you?" asked Sad.

"Uh-huh!"

"F'r gosh sake! Wasn't killed, was he, Speck?" Sad's surprise seemed genuine.

"We don't know," the sheriff answered the question. "If he was, somebody swiped the corpse."

"Swiped the corpse!" Sad seemed shocked. "What would anybody swipe a corpse for, sheriff?"

"Yuh might as well tell 'em all about it," said Snipe sarcastically. "They prob'ly know more about it than you do."

Sad walked up to Snipe, who began to wish he had kept still, and studied him at close range.

"I don't reckon I've met you," said Sad easily. "What did yuh say yore name was?"

"I never said."

"That's right. You're one of the Box 8 boys, ain'tcha?"

"Yeah, I work there."

"You sabe this range pretty well, don'tcha?"

Snipe licked his lips and squinted at Sad. He wondered what these questions were leading to. Finally he nodded affirmatively.

"Uh-huh," Sad grew thoughtful. "You know quite a lot about cattle and range work, don'tcha?"

"I ort to," said Snipe. "I've been punchin' cows for——"

"Yo're what I'd call an observin' person," interrupted Sad. "Some folks think I'm a mind-reader," Sad shot a glance at Bunty, whose face reddened quickly. "Mebbe I am—who knows? Anyway, I picked you out for this test."

"What in hell do yuh mean?" blurted Snipe nervously.

"In all yore experience on the range——" Sad propounded the question seriously. "In all of yore experience, mind yuh; did yuh ever know that yuh could tell a cattle rustler by the color of his fingernails?"

Almost before Sad had finished his question Snipe Lee jerked up his right hand and shot a searching glance at his nails. It was a trap which would catch nearly anyone, whether guilty or innocent —an old joke of the cattle country. It is likely that every man present caught himself in the act, except Sad and Swede.

In a flash Snipe Lee realized what he had done, and his hand flashed down to his gun; too late. Sad was into him, cramping his gun arm, making it impossible for Snipe to draw the gun from its holster.

"Leggo me, damn yuh!" snarled Snipe. "You can't pin nothin' like that onto me!"

Sad laughed, gave the arm an extra twist, swinging Snipe almost off his feet, and appropriated Snipe's six-shooter. Then he shoved Snipe aside and stepped back, while the luckless Box 8 man rubbed his aching muscles and cursed witheringly.

"That don't mean nothin'," laughed the sheriff. "I looked at my nails, too."

"So did I," confessed Wheezer.

"Some folks can't take a joke," laughed Sad. "Our friends over there is too thin-minded to fool with. Here's yore gun." He tossed it to Snipe, who caught it in his left hand and shoved it into his holster. His right arm was almost helpless.

"Now," Sad turned to the sheriff, "yuh mind tellin' me what this shootin' scrape was all about? I may be a mind reader, but I can't cover all the territory."

The sheriff did not mind. In fact, he seemed perfectly willing to tell all he knew. Sad and Swede listened patiently, nodding now and then, as though to confirm what Speck had told. The sheriff admitted that the posse had been looking for them.

"I don't blame yuh," said Sad. "It shore looked like we might 'a' had a hand in it."

"Ain't nothin' been proved yet," said Snipe painfully.

"Aw, go look at yore nails!" snapped the sheriff. "You've talked almost too much, Snipe. Go put up the horses, Wheezer. If anybody can prove to me that old Eph Wyatt has been killed, I'll look for his body, but I'm no damned bloodhound."

The posse took their horses back to the hitch-racks, and the sheriff's two cowpunchers drew him aside and imparted the

news that they had only been able to round up fifteen head in the lower ranges.

"Didja put 'em in the Bar S pasture?" asked the sheriff."

The cowboys had.

"That's all right," said the sheriff. "Somebody cut the fence and got away with the three hundred and ten head; so they might as well get the other fifteen."

"What do yuh mean?" asked "Slim" Wray, one of the cowboys. He had not heard about the loss. Art Alberts, the other cowboy, listened with open mouth, while the sheriff explained.

"Aw, they must 'a' jist turned 'em loose," said Slim. "We'll round 'em up ag'in, Buck."

"Go to it, Slim," said the sheriff. "I hope yo're right."

Speck sat down on the sidewalk with Sad and Swede, and the sheriff came over to him.

"Kid, you don't have much luck, do yuh?" he said thoughtfully. "I wish I had a home to take yuh to, but I ain't. I've got an extra cot in my office, where yuh can sleep—and Oreana won't see yuh go hungry."

That's all right," grinned Speck. "I'll git along. Much obliged for the cot, sheriff. Mebbe I can help yuh some way, doin' somethin' around the office. I've got to find my dog before I do anythin' much. He sure rattled his hocks when that shootin' started, and the last I seen of him he was runnin' a sandy on a gopher."

The sheriff laughed and turned toward his office. "Come on, Speck, and I'll show yuh that cot."

"All right," said Speck gladly. He started after the sheriff, but ran back to Sad and Swede.

"I'm sorry I had to steal that horse," he whispered, "but I'm sure glad I yanked instead of squeezed."

He turned and ran after the sheriff, leaving Sad and Swede looking curiously at each other.

"Glad he yanked instead of squeezin'," said Swede blankly. "Now, what do yuh make of that, Sad?"

Sad Sontag laughed softly and looked across the street where Buck Rainey and Speck were at the sheriff's office door.

"He must 'a' meant that rifle, Swede. He flinched on the pull. By golly, that kid sure is a dinger. Yanked on the trigger and pulled the muzzle far enough to the right to miss us. He's got nerve to burn, and by golly"—Sad stopped and reached for his cigarette makings—"he deserves a better deal than he's been gettin'."

"Uh-huh," yawned Swede. "I reckon we better eat. Here comes Bill Wyatt and his man, Friday."

Wyatt and Abe Snow, a tall, dark complexioned cowboy, rode up to the Cactus saloon hitch-rack and dismounted. Snipe Lee met them, talking earnestly, and the three went into the saloon.

"I reckon we better eat," agreed Sad. "Snipe Lee is tellin' 'em all about it, and it won't be sweet news to Bill's ears. I hate to fight on an empty stomach; so we'll fold the old insides around a flock of food before trouble starts."

They walked past the Cactus saloon and up the street to a restaurant, where they proceeded to sit down facing the door and ordered a big meal.

"Well, our alibi sure got past with the sheriff," laughed Swede.

"Sure," Sad laughed joyfully. "You are one of the best liars I ever heard. I'll betcha Snipe Lee is still wonderin' if his nails show that he's a rustler."

"I wonder if he is?" grinned Swede. "He sure took it to heart."

Sad grinned thoughtfully and leaned back in his chair to allow the waiter to place a platter of food before him. The waiter was a pasty-faced, stoop-shouldered person, with a crooked nose and a missing front tooth. Sad looked at the platter and up at the waiter.

"Three eggs apiece, waiter?"

"Yeah." The waiter grinned, exposing the incomplete set of upper teeth. "Thought yuh might be hungry. It won't cost yuh any more than two would."

"Gosh, this is a reg'lar place to eat," grinned Sad. "Do yuh size up yore customers and feed 'em accordin'ly?"

"No-o-o. Them extra eggs are for whippin' Bunty O'Neil."

"Oh, yeah!" Sad looked curiously at the waiter. "Kinda like gettin' a medal for bravery, eh?"

"I dunno about that. See that crooked nose and that missin' tooth? Well, I never thought about kickin' Bunty's shins."

"He got you, did he?"

"He sure did. I was out for fifteen minutes. Never knew what hit me."

"Bunty's sure a character," observed Swede, attacking his ham and eggs.

The waiter spat dryly. "Character, hell; he's a dirty fighter. Somebody will kill him some day, and then he'll wish he'd been square."

"Most all dead men kinda repent," nodded Sad. "What do yuh know about Bill Wyatt?"

The waiter grinned. "You whipped him, too, they tell me. I don't know much about him. Bunty butted Bill, and Bill petted him with the barrel of a gun. They was thick as thieves before that. Bill got Bunty to come down here and buy out the Oreana. Folks used to say that Bill owned an interest in the Oreana, but I don't guess there was any truth in it.

"Bunty poured liquor into poor Jim Steeb and killed him. They tell me that Bunty's got Steeb's notes for a lot of money. Steeb practically lived there at the Oreana. Bunty got him to drinkin' absence. Didja ever see an absence drinker? It shore is awful stuff. Make a man kick his grandmother."

"Did Steeb kick his grandmother?" asked Swede seriously.

"I don't guess he had one."

"Made it kinda bad," observed Swede. "Feller ought to kinda check up on his relation before he starts drinkin' that stuff."

"Must be an awful relief to kick the old lady," said Sad, balancing an egg on his knife-blade. "I never had one. Still, yuh never have everythin' in this life. Can we have some coffee?"

"Yuh sure can. I'll bring yuh in the whole pot."

"We're prominent citizens," grinned Sad, as the waiter hurried away. "If somebody kills us, they'll prob'ly put up a big monument in the middle of the street for us."

"Yeah," reflected Swede seriously, "and they'll carve on it, 'All fools ain't dead yet, but we got two big ones cinched.'"

While Sad and Swede appeased their hunger, Bill Wyatt and his men, Abe Snow and Snipe Lee, stood at the Cactus bar and drank liberally. Snipe had told Bill and Abe all about the affair in no uncertain terms, and bitterly censured the sheriff for not arresting Sad and Swede for murder. Of course, Snipe was still smarting from his encounter with Sad and was inclined to be vindictive.

"He accused me of bein' a rustler," complained Snipe. "Yuh know, he can't git away with a thing like that, Bill."

"He got away with it, didn't he?" demanded Bill. "You talk too much, Snipe. But where do yuh suppose the old man is?"

Snipe shook his head and felt of his twisted arm muscles.

"I can't even start to suppose, Bill. Jist like I said, he wasn't at the buckboard, nor at the ranch. There was the dead horse and the live one. Everthin' was jist like that kid said, except we couldn't find old Eph."

"What did the sheriff think?" asked Bill.

"Well, he didn't know. We had an idea that them two strangers had killed him, but when we couldn't find the body, we didn't know what to think. Wheezer Wilson figured that they had shot the old man and got scared that somebody might find it out; so they hid the body."

"What good would that do?" demanded Bill.

"Yuh got to prove a murder," said Snipe wisely. "If there ain't no corpse yuh can't prove nothin'. A man ain't noways dead until he's proved dead, and yuh can't prove nothin' without yuh can identify the corpse. If they don't never find old Eph, the law won't never figure him to be dead."

"But if he don't never show up, he must be dead," argued Bill.

"He must be," agreed Snipe, "but the law don't look at it like me and you would. Mebbe old Eph wandered off in the brush and died; mebbe somebody took the corpse and hid it."

"But why would they hide it?" Bill poured out a fresh drink and drank it raw. "I don't sabe it, Snipe."

"To protect themselves," explained Snipe. "Jist like I said, the law don't know that anybody got killed yet."

Slim Wray and Art Alberts, the sheriff's two cowhands, came in, so the argument was dropped for a while. Bill invited them to partake of his hospitality, which they accepted with alacrity, and the talk drifted to the fact that the Bar S herd was missing.

"Bunty O'Neil is sure fussin' about that," declared Slim. "If we can't find them cows Bunty won't get the money that's comin' to him. I heard him say that he'd have them cows or somebody would be darned sorry."

"He talks big," grunted Bill Wyatt. "I ain't got no love for that Sontag person, but I'm sure glad he piled Bunty."

"Who are them two fellers, anyway?" asked Abe Snow, squinting through his glass of liquor at the light. "Look like a couple of cow detectives to me, if anybody asks yuh."

"What would they be doin' over here?" demanded Snipe.

"Yuh know they made yuh look at yore fingernails," smiled Slim Wray meaningly. Snipe growled and reached for his glass.

"They ain't got nothin' on me."

"Well, they ain't been here long," grinned Slim.

"What about lookin' at fingernails?" queried Bill.

"Didn't you hear about it? Sontag asked Snipe if he knew that you could tell a cattle rustler by lookin' at his fingernails."

Bill turned his hand sideways and glanced at his nails while Slim snorted with laughter.

"There yuh go!" he chuckled. "That's what Snipe done."

"That's a hell of a joke!" growled Bill glowering at Slim. "All fingernails are the same color."

"You looked!" choked Slim.

"You don't mean to insinuate that I'm a rustler, do yuh?" Bill grew suddenly belligerent. He shoved away from the bar and glared at Slim.

"Aw, cool off," advised Slim. "Nobody's accusin' yuh, Bill. Yo're jist like Snipe. He got mad, too."

"Well, I'm no rustler, Slim," declared Bill coldly. "I'll accept yore apology, but don't say anythin' like that again. I'm honest, I am."

"Sure, we all know it," agreed Slim. "Let's have another drink."

"I'm hones', too," blurbled Snipe, who was looking owlishly at himself in the back-bar mirror. "Almos' too honesht."

"Almost," said Bill savagely.

It was not often that the Box 8 outfit drank too much liquor, but that night was one time when they threw all reserve to the winds. Whisky seemed to have little effect on Bill Wyatt, except to make him more savage.

But he kept out of the Oreana saloon. Several times he met Sad and Swede during the evening, but avoided direct contact with them.

"Look out for Bill Wyatt," Slim Wray cautioned Sad and Swede.

"What's achin' him tonight?" asked Sad.

"Liquor and a bad disposition. Yuh see, old Eph Wyatt was his uncle."—

"Was his uncle?" queried Sad. "Ain't he still his uncle?"

"Well—sure," hesitated Slim. "They're sayin' that the old man is dead, yuh know. I suppose Bill is workin' up a little warmedicine for himself. Of course the sheriff don't believe yuh had any hand in shootin' the old man, but the sheriff ain't everybody."

"Much obliged," grinned Sad. 'We'll look out for Bill. He prob'ly thinks he owes me somethin'."

"And he'll pay yuh, if he gets a safe chance."

"And he'll get a receipt," said Sad meaningly. "Anyway, I'm sure obliged to yuh, Slim."

But Bill Wyatt was too wise to start trouble with them. For once in his life he decided to let discretion be the better part of valor. He got his men, Snipe and Abe, away from the Cactus bar and walked them up and down the street. They sobered considerably, and Bill outlined his scheme.

"They hid the body of the old man, that's a cinch. Fightin' 'em won't tell us where it's hid; sabe? They've got a room at the Oreana hotel, and them partitions ain't very thick. Here's the scheme. Abe, me and you will see if we can git the room next to them. They'll probably talk enough to let us know a few things. Snipe, you take our horses to the livery-stable, and you stay there. If they decide to leave town, you come a-runnin'; sabe? Leave our horses all saddled, so we won't lose no time.

"And from now on, we don't take no more liquor. We've got to find out a few things. You better go to the stable now, Snipe. Me and Abe will get the room, and find out which room Sontag rented. If we can't get the next one without seemin' to want it, mebbe it's empty and we can take it anyway."

Snipe grumbled profanely, but went to the hitch-rack after the horses. The stable-keeper showed him which stalls to use, asked Snipe if he wanted to take off the saddles, accepted the two-bits per head and went back to his gear-room.

He thought that Snipe went out, which Snipe did not. Later the stable-keeper went out, shut the big doors and went up to the Oreana saloon. Snipe stretched out on the grain-bin and went to sleep. He had a pint of liquor on his hip, which assisted in his departure to the land of dreams.

Sad and Swede were at the Oreana sa-

loon when the stable-keeper ran into them and accepted of their hospitality.

"Kinda quiet tonight," observed Sad.

"Yeah, it is." The stable-keeper squinted around the room. "It always is this early. Mebbe it'll pick up. The Box 8 must figure on makin' a night of it, 'cause they've stabled their horses. It ain't often they do that. Usually leave their broncs at the rack until they're ready to go home."

Sad squinted at himself in the back-bar mirror and wondered why Bill Wyatt and his outfit intended to make a night of it. He drew Swede out of the Oreana and they made the rounds, looking for Bill and his gang, who were not in evidence.

"You think they're layin' for us?" asked Swede.

"I dunno," Sad grinned thoughtfully. "Mebbe they are. Let's look a little further."

They went down the street to the hotel and entered the dingy little office, which was little more than a wide hall, lighted by a hanging lamp. The rooms were all on the second floor. Behind the little counter sat the proprietor, tilted back against the wall, reading a year-old magazine.

"Goin' to bed early, ain't yuh?" he asked.

"It is a little early," agreed Sad.

"Sober, too," observed the proprietor, and laughed at his own wit. "They don't usually go to bed sober on Sat'day night here. Bill Wyatt and Abe Snow got too much under their belts, and bought a room a while ago. They sure must 'a' punished a lot of hooch."

"Yeah, I reckon they did," laughed Sad. "They'll prob'ly snore all night and keep us awake."

"By jing, I never thought about that when I put 'em in number five. That's right beside you fellers. Say," he tilted forward and got to his feet, "I'll git 'em out of there."

"No, don't do that," said Sad quickly. "They're likely asleep right now. Shucks, we don't mind."

"Well, if yuh don't mind. By golly, I never thought about it when I got 'em the room. I'll change, if yuh say so."

"No, that's all right," assured Sad.

They sauntered outside and crossed to the Cactus hitch-rack, where Sad appropriated a lariat rope, which he concealed under his coat. Then they went back to the hotel and climbed up the stairs. Sad cautioned Swede to let him do the work; so both of them staggered visibly down the hall.

Sad carried a narrow loop of rope in his hands, as he blundered drunkenly into the door of number five and quickly slipped the loop around the door-knob.

"Hey!" chuckled Swede drunkenly. "Tha's the wrong door, Sad. We sleep in thish room."

"Tha's right," muttered Sad. "Excuse me, everybody." He staggered across the hall and against the other door, where he quickly drew the rope tight and threw several half-hitches around the other door-knob.

"What's the matter—can'tcha fin' the key-hole, Swede?"

"Thish is wrong key," declared Swede. "Too small, I tell yuh. C'mon."

They went down the hall, reviling the proprietor for giving them the wrong key, which he had not. In fact, they had no key.

"That was a maguey rope," chuckled Sad. "Them things ain't got no stretch in 'em. Bill Wyatt is smart enough to want to know more, which ain't nothin' against him."

"Now, what do we pull off next?" asked Swede, chuckling with laughter.

"Find Snipe Lee. I've got a hunch."

And they faded down the dark street toward the livery-stable, while Bill Wyatt and Abe Snow sat on a bed and waited for them to come back with the right key.

It was a long, long wait.

Finally Bill Wyatt swore disgustedly and decided to go out and see what had become of them, but the door would not open. It would slip past the lock, which proved that it was fastened from the outside, and which proved that Sad and Swede had out-smarted them.

It was dark outside and the two-story drop was too much for Bill to risk, because he was not sure just what might be down there for him to fall into.

"They've roped us in," declared Bill, punctuating his declaration with oaths "They wasn't drunk, Abe."

But Abe did not care. He had stretched out on the bed again and was snoring blissfully. Bill pried the door open as far as possible with the barrel of his gun, cut a notch with his pocket-knife and managed to tie his knife to the barrel of Abe's gun strongly enough to enable him to cut the rope.

Then he left Abe sleeping audibly and went downstairs, where he accosted the sleepy proprietor.

"Has Sontag and Harrigan come in yet?" he demanded.

"No," replied the proprietor. "They was in here a couple hours ago, but ain't been in since."

"Came upstairs, didn't they?"

"Nope. Said they was afraid you'd keep 'em awake snorin'."

"Oh, yeah!" Bill snorted and went outside.

He made the rounds of the saloons, but could not find Sad and Swede; so he headed for the livery-stable, where he found the stable-man in the gear-room, getting ready for bed.

"Hyah, Bill," greeted the stable-man. "Want yore bronc?"

"No," said Bill shortly. He thought for several moments. Then, "I'm kinda lookin' for Sontag and Harrigan, and I wondered if they went away tonight."

The stable-man picked up his lantern and walked out to the stalls.

"Their horses and saddles are gone," he said. "They must 'a' rode out while I was uptown."

"Uh-huh," Ed squinted reflectively. "Seen anythin' of Snipe Lee?"

"Not since he brought yore horses down here."

"All right." Bill turned and started for the door.

"Say, do yuh want me to grain yore broncs?"

Bill turned at the door, "Yuh might as well."

"More work," grumbled the stable-man, as Bill went out. "I can always think of somethin' that'll make me extra work."

He walked over to the oat-bin, hung up his lantern and unfastened the staple which held down the lid. Swinging up the long lid, he leaned over to scoop up a pail of oats, when Snipe Lee sat up and looked him in the face.

The shock was so great that the stable-man dropped the lid on Snipe's unprotected head and stepped back; while from within came the muffled voice of Snipe, demanding to know why in hell everybody was pickin' onto him.

The stable-man lifted the lid and let Snipe get out. He was still half-drunk, dazed and inclined to be indignant.

"Well how did yuh get in there, anyway?"

Snipe scratched his head thoughtfully and looked into the oatbin.

"Mus' 'a' fell in," he said thickly. "How in hell does anybody git into oatbins, I'd crave to ask yuh?"

"You couldn't fasten the staple," argued the stable-man.

"Thasso? Lemme tell yuh, I'm smart." Snipe rocked on his heels and goggled owlishly at the lantern.

"But yuh couldn't do a thing like that," declared the stable-man. "Yuh could fall into the bin, but I'm danged if yuh could lock the lid from the outside."

"Is thasso? Ha, ha, ha, ha! Is thasso? Well, smarty, couldn't I lock it firs'? Anshwer me that. Couldn't I? I must 'a' done it thataway. Shay," Snipe looked around foolishly, "have you sheen anythin' of Sontag and Harrigan?"

"They left here quite a while ago."

"Oh, my!" Snipe seemed shocked.

"Bill Wyatt was here a while ago, and he asked for you."

"Yeah? Huh! Well, I'm mush obliged. S'-long."

And Snipe went weaving out of the door, while the stable-man filled the bucket with oats and fed the three horses. He flung the bucket against the wall, picked up his lantern and went back to his bunk, still wondering how on earth a man could get inside an oatbin and lock himself in from the outside.

V

THE next morning Sheriff Buck Rainey and Wheezer Wilson his assistant went hunting cows. They went past the Bar S, and were agreeably surprised to find most of the last fifteen Bar S cattle in the pasture. They stopped to put up the broken wires, and rode on.

Slim Wray and Art Alberts, the sheriff's punchers, had gone further north, looking for the missing herd. The following day the sheriff was to sell out the Bar S, and he wanted more than fifteen head of cattle.

"Looks like a short chance," observed Wheezer, as they rode further into the hills. "We can't find much except Box 8's and Diamond W's. Old Eph Wyatt must have quite a lot of cows, Buck."

"Y'betcha." The sheriff spat reflectively. "I wonder what did happen to the old man. It don't seem reasonable to think that Sontag and Harrigan had anythin' to do with the shootin'. There ain't no motive."

"We don't know of any," amended Wheezer.

"My gosh, you're gettin' particular. Pretty soon you'll be doin' all your eatin' with a fork, jist to be correct."

"Not 'less they make a kind that don't leak food. There's Bill Wyatt and Snipe Lee."

Wheezer pointed at the opposite hillside, where two riders were coming toward them. They drew rein and waited for the Box 8 boss and his puncher to join them.

"Lookin' for Bar S stock?" asked Bill, after the customary greetings had been exchanged.

"That's about all it amounts to," replied Buck Rainey. "We ain't found none yet."

Bill twisted in his saddle and pointed east. "We seen five or six head over thataway this mornin', and there was fifteen or twenty head out near the Box 8."

"That ain't noways three hundred and ten head," grinned Buck.

Wheezer grinned at Snipe Lee. "What happened to yuh last night, Snipe? I heard Jimmy Logan, the stable-keeper, talkin' about findin' yuh in the oatbin, with the lid locked."

Snipe twisted his face disgustedly.

"I must 'a' been awful drunk. Don't remember a thing about it. Took our broncs to the stable, set down on the oatbin, and don't know a darned thing what happened after that."

"And somebody roped two doors together at the hotel," said Buck. "McKinney showed me the rope. Slim Wray was pretty drunk when he found the lariat half-hitched around his door-knob; so he thought it was a warnin' that somebody had hung to his door. He slept in the barn with a six-gun strapped to his wrist."

"That must 'a' been after we left," said Bill dryly. "Got any track of the old man, Buck?"

"No!" replied the sheriff.

"Uh-huh. I happen to know that Sontag and Harrigan rode out of Oreana about midnight."

"How'd yuh know?"

"Jimmy Logan said they did."

"Thasso?" The sheriff squinted reflectively. "I wonder where they went. I don't sabe that pair, Bill."

"You ain't got nothin' on the rest of us, Buck."

"They're sure full of fun," offered Wheezer.

"They're full of hell!" snorted Bill. "They'll run against a snag, if they don't watch out."

"They ain't so young," observed Wheezer. "'S funny they ain't run agin' it before this."

"This ain't findin' us any Bar S stock," reminded the sheriff. "Want to ride with us, Bill?"

"Yeah, we might as well."

And while Bill and Snipe joined forces with the sheriff, Sad Sontag and Swede Harrigan also rode into the hills, also looking for Bar S stock. They found one of that brand, which they examined closely, noting that the iron had been run on the right shoulder.

"Well, that's one of the three hundred and ten," observed Sad, as they moved on. There were numerous Box 8 cattle scattered along the brushy draws.

"This sale won't be worth attendin'," declared Swede. "By golly, I wish we'd stayed in Sundown."

"I'm havin' a good time," grinned Sad. "You want too much. I wonder what Bill Wyatt and his bunch had to say? I'll betcha Snipe Lee didn't know what happened to him, Swede."

"I'll bet he didn't. Only thing I hope is that somebody let him out of the oatbin before he suffocated."

"Aw, he was all right. That lid was full of cracks. Wyatt was foxy enough to take that adjoinin' room, where they'd have a swell chance to hear us talk, and I'll betcha he cursed the man who invented a maguey rope."

Sad pulled up his horse, as several Box 8 cattle came out of a draw beyond them and moved into an open swale. He studied them for several moments, a half-smile on his face, and then took down his rope.

"Whatcha goin' to do, Sad?" asked Swede.

"Practice a little," grinned Sad, spurring his horse forward and shaking out his loop. Swede swore foolishly, but did not follow him.

The cattle broke into a gallop, heading

back toward the ravine, but Sad singled out a rangy, red steer and spurred swiftly in pursuit. The animal twisted along the

edge of the shallow ravine, trying to reach the cover of a willow thicket, but the loop sailed true, dropped fair over the horns, and Sad Sontag made his dally around the horn in approved style.

It was all very well done, except that Sad's cinch was far too loose for a roping-stunt, and when the jerk came it yanked the saddle high up over the horse's withers, throwing it sideways, and upsetting the calculations of a well regulated roping horse.

The big steer took a header into the brush, the horse skidded sideways over the edge of the washout, and Sad went out of the saddle, much after the manner of a flying-squirrel hunting for a more favorable location.

The action had hardly taken place before Swede spurred past, his own rope in hand, dismounted almost on the run and proceeded to hog-tie the steer, which had had the shock of its life. Sad's horse regained its feet, kicked a few times, blew the alkali dust from its nostrils and looked back at Sad, who was sitting against the opposite bank, rubbing the alkali out of his eyes.

"You rised something, didn't yuh?" fleered Swede, red of face. "You'll never get no sense, Sad Sontag. Ropin' a steer as big as that one on a loose cinch! I've seen a lot of fools in my time!"

"You hadn't ort to be vain," said Sad painfully. "It's all right for a feller of yore physique to look in a mirror, but he shouldn't brag about it. Didja tie up the little pet?"

"Yeah, I tied it," Swede spat out some alkali viciously. "If I hadn't, that red steer would 'a' made a pet out of you, cowboy."

"Thank yuh kindly, Swede." Sad climbed out, after working his saddle back into place, and walked over to the wheezing steer. It was lying on its right side, glaring its hate from a pair of blood-shot eyes.

Sad squatted on his heels and reached for his cigarette papers, while Swede complained audibly.

"I dunno why yuh done this, Sad. That steer feels the insult awful strong, and I'm goin' to ask *you* to turn it loose. I'm no matador. I'll betcha even money that when yuh take the piggin'-string off that steer, he'll beat yuh to yore bronc."

Sad frowned over his cigarette, and sang mournfully, "O-o-o-oh, Susie Jones was a clingin' vi-i-i-ine, but her father was a pi-i-i-izen o-o-oak."

"Oh, all right," sighed Swede.

Sad got to his feet and walked over to the steer.

"C'mere, Swede, and help me turn him over."

"Do yuh think he's tired, Sad? And after we turn him over, do we have to set him up for a spell?"

"Don't strain yourself," grinned Sad. They completed their turning process, when something unexpected happened.

"Don't move, gents!"

It was the voice of Buck Rainey, the sheriff of Oreana. Sad and Swede whirled quickly to see Buck, Wheezer Wilson, Bill Wyatt and Snipe Lee, standing just a few feet away, guns in hand.

"Keep yore hands where they are," warned the sheriff. "Get their guns, Wheezer."

Wheezer came forward and emptied their holsters, while the two Sundown cowboys looked blankly at each other.

"We been watchin' yuh," said the sheriff easily. "Yuh see, it ain't ethical to hang yore rope on other men's stock in this range, Sontag."

"That's one of my animals, too," said Wyatt angrily.

"I shore apologize," said Sad contritely.

"Apologize!" snorted Bill. "I—guess—you—would!"

"Yuh might at least be gentleman enough to accept it."

"Huh? Say," Bill Wyatt's voice shook with anger, "do yuh think yuh can get away with jist an apology? What kind of a cow-country didja come from, anyway?"

"Pretty fair," said Sad seriously. "'Course it ain't the best in the state, but we kinda like it up there. Lots of nice folks up thataway, Wyatt."

"Yeah, I'll betcha!"

"Got 'em before they had a chance to heat an iron," observed Snipe. The sheriff looked all around and even inspected their saddles. He seemed disappointed not to find anything which they might have used to misbrand an animal. He brought Sad's horse up beside Swede's, and dropped the reins.

"I don't sabe this," he admitted. "What was you fellers tryin' to do, anyway?"

"Jist bein' playful," grinned Swede.

"Yeah, I'll betcha." The sheriff scratched his chin and studied the steer. Wheezer squatted on his heels, holding Sad's gun in one hand, and Swede's in the other.

"Well, I reckon I'll have to take you fellers to town." The sheriff motioned to

Snipe Lee. "Let the steer go, Snipe. We've got enough witnesses to this, I reckon."

"Yo're danged right we have!" grunted Bill Wyatt.

Snipe Lee walked over to the steer and loosened the rope. It was not the ethical thing to do, and under any other circumstances, it is doubtful that any of them would have considered turning a range steer loose among unmounted men.

Wheezer had placed the two six-shooters on his lap, holding them between his shirt and chaps, as he manufactured a cigarette.

Snipe yanked off the rope and stepped back, slapping the big red animal across the rump with the coils. The steer heaved to its feet with a deep bellow of rage, whirled with the agility of a deer and lunged straight at Buck Rainey and Bill Wyatt, who were standing close together.

The left horn of the animal caught in one side of Buck's vest, threw him off his feet and he went headlong into the washout, while Wyatt and Wheezer collided, each having a different idea of which way to go, and they went down together.

The steer whirled at the brink of the washout and headed for Snipe Lee, who was waving his rope and yelling unheard advice to everyone. Sad and Swede were not merely spectators. Wheezer had forgotten the fact that he was custodian of the captured artillery, and the guns had barely fallen in the dust when Sad swept them up, whirled and went into his saddle.

Swede was mounted almost as soon, and while the sheriff's posse scrambled for safety and took pot-shots at the infuriated steer, Sad and Swede rode out of gunshot, turning their tear-streaked faces toward a place where they might cry out their mirth in safety.

A forty-five bullet finally took all the fight out of the steer, and the dusty, scratched, bruised and otherwise injured posse managed to get together for a mutual condemnation meeting. Wheezer had lost a tooth in his collision with Wyatt, and he seemed inclined to think that Wyatt had done it with malice aforethought. Snipe Lee had a lump the size of an egg over his right eye, which pained him greatly.

"Blame yourself for that, Snipe," wailed Wheezer. "You hit yourself with that hondo."

"I did not! The steer hit me!"

"You never was within fifty feet of that steer!"

"What did yuh turn it loose for?" demanded Wyatt.

"He told me to," pointing at Buck, who was rubbing his shoulder.

"Ain't you got no sense of your own?" queried Wyatt painfully.

"You ort to listen to nobody but Bill," declared Wheezer sarcastically. "He's yore boss, Snipe—the clumsy danged fool! Yeah, I mean you, Bill! How didja ever expect to dodge a steer, goin' the way you was? If it hadn't been for you, I'd still have them guns and we'd have our prisoners."

"You didn't have them guns when we met," declared Wyatt. "Not by a dang sight, you didn't! An' I'm no clumsy danged fool, either."

"Well, you ain't an active one, that's a cinch. No, and by golly, you ain't no medium one."

"Aw-w-w, don't fight about it," wailed Buck. "Neither one of yuh are acrobats, and yo're both fools. Why didn't yuh watch the prisoners?"

"Why didn't you?" countered Wheezer angrily.

"'Cause I was hangin' to that steer's horn by my vest, that's why. It's a danged good thing that vests don't have sleeves."

"Well, we might as well go back," said Wheezer painfully. He put his right forefinger in his mouth and invited them to inspect the damage within.

"Aw-w-gle ugl nahk umf foot 'n aw-w-gl," he told them distinctly.

"Yawgl nawgl woggle," replied the sheriff seriously.

Wheezer spat painfully. "Think yo're danged smart, don'tcha?"

"Well, I can talk any language you can. Let's go home."

They limped back down the draw to where they had left their horses, mounted and went back toward Oreana.

"What'll you do if them fellers come back to Oreana?" asked Bill Wyatt.

"Yuh don't think they will, do yuh?" asked Buck.

"I said, if they do."

"Oh, yeah." The sheriff was inclined to be sarcastic. "Well, if they do, I don't know what I'll do, Bill. And if they don't, I don't know either; so there yuh are.

There wasn't a thing around there that they could use to blot a brand nor change one."

"Then why did they throw that steer?" demanded Bill.

"I dunno, do you? If this askin' questions is some kind of a game, deal me a hand. You seen as much of it as I did."

"Why did they turn that steer over, if they wasn't goin' to get at the brand?" remarked Lee.

The sheriff turned in his saddle and glared at Snipe.

"That'll be about all for this lesson," he said angrily.

"Well, can't we discuss the thing?" asked Bill peevishly.

"Shore yuh can. But don't ask me things. I ain't got no brains, and I'm willin' to admit it. I don't know the why of anythin'. Go ahead and ask Snipe a few questions, if yuh must ask somebody."

"Ask him why he turned that steer loose," suggested Wheezer.

"Or yuh might go and ask the steer," said Buck. "He prob'ly heard 'em say what they was goin' to do with him."

The questions ended right there, and the four men said little more to each other on the way to Oreana. It was rather late in the afternoon when they arrived. The sheriff and Wheezer went to their office, where they rubbed their bruises with liniment and used up their supply of court-plaster.

"This afternoon's work wasn't anythin' to brag about," said Buck meaningly. "I don't reckon that Bill and Snipe will spread the joyous tidin's; so we won't."

"I read about a sheriff that always got his man," said Wheezer. "He jist never made no mistakes. I don't jist remember who the feller was that wrote the book."

"Some feller with considerable imagination," said Buck.

"Yeah, I sh'd say he did," agreed Wheezer. "He'd prob'ly been able to figure out what them two fellers was tryin' to do with that red steer, Buck. Nobody had to ask him questions. Shucks, he up and tells 'em right on the spot.

"I never seen such a feller as this'n was. De-duct things! Whooee! Always knowed jist what to say, too. As I said before, nobody had to ask him any questions. I suppose he could 'a' answered any question without no trouble. And I s'pose he would, too."

Buck squinted at Wheezer, who was innocently examining his mouth in the mirror.

"And nobody asked him any questions, Wheezer?"

"Nossir."

"Well, I wish I could be elected in his county. If yo're tryin' to make me mad —go ahead, pardner. I know just how much I can stand, and you don't."

"Well," grinned Wheezer. "I ain't fool enough to ask yuh when you've got a-plenty."

A few minutes later there entered young Speck Steeb, carrying Boze, the pup, in his arms and smiling triumphantly.

"The gol derned pup found me," he declared.

"Where did he find yuh?" grinned Wheezer.

"In the restaurant garbage can."

"My gosh!" exploded Buck. "What was you doin' in the garbage can, Speck?"

"Well," grinned Speck, "that's where I found Boze."

"Our family is all united," observed Wheezer. "I reckon we'll pick fleas from now on, Buck. What do yuh know, Speck?"

"I know that Bill Wyatt is tellin' folks that Sontag and Harrigan are rustlers. He said they was ropin' his cows, and that they got away from yuh. Is that right?"

"He's tellin' it, is he?" grunted Buck.

"Yeah, and he said that it was time that the cattlemen took the law in their own hands."

Buck and Wheezer looked at each other. Wheezer grinned widely, but Buck was serious. Slim Wray and Art Alberts rode up to the front of the office and dismounted. They were dusty and tired.

"We put twenty-five head in the Bar S pasture," said Slim. "And that's every darned head we could find. We picked most of 'em up near the Box 8, and it kinda looks like they might be a little bunch that got away from that main herd. If that bunch hadn't been stolen, it's a cinch we'd find more, Buck."

"I s'pose," nodded Buck. "It ain't goin' to be much of a sale, but we'll sell what there is."

"Sontag and Harrigan came down here to buy stock, didn't they?"

"That kinda remains to be seen, Slim. They probably won't be at the sale tomorrow."

"I'd like to make a bet on that," said Speck.

Buck laughed at the boy. "You'd like to bet on it, eh? What have yuh got to bet?"

"Well," Speck hesitated and shifted his

feet. "I ain't got no money, but I'll bet—I'll bet my dog."

Buck rubbed his chin thoughtfully for a moment.

"No bet, Speck," he said. "Yore hunch is too good. Any old time a kid is willin' to bet his dog, the odds are all agin' the other feller."

Abe Snow had been in town nearly all day, and now he rode back toward the Box 8 with Bill Wyatt and Snipe Lee, who had imbibed much liquor in a short space of time. Abe had been left in town to see if he could hear anything regarding Sontag and Harrison, but it was Wyatt and Lee who had the information.

They rode in at the Box 8, stabled their horses and went to the ranch-house. There was no one there, except the Chinese cook, whose cognomen was One Bum Lung. He was cooking supper when Bill went into the kitchen to see how long it would be before eating time.

"Two men come heah today," stated One Bum Lung. "I no sabe 'em. One loan ho'se, one bay ho'se."

"Yeah?" Bill scowled thoughtfully. "One roan horse and one bay horse, eh? What did they want?"

"No talk. I seeum on collal fence. Long time set on fence."

"Long time set on fence, eh? Where did they set on the fence?"

"Longside li'l chute, where bland put on. You sabe place?"

"Uh-huh." Bill whirled and went back into the living-room, where Snipe and Abe were arguing over the ownership of an old magazine.

"Sontag and Harrigan were here today," said Bill. "Lung says they sat on the corral fence beside the brandin'-chute."

"The hell they did!" snorted Snipe. "What for?"

"How would I know?" retorted Bill.

"That don't look so good," said Abe seriously. "The sooner we run them jiggers out of the country the better it'll be for us."

"And that's no danged lie," agreed Bill heartily. "If they show up at that sale tomorrow, there'll be somethin' doin'. You fellers keep sober and keep yore eyes open; 'sabe?"

"Yeah, we'll do that, too," agreed Snipe. "I reckon Bunty will be at the sale, eh?"

Bill laughed shortly. "Yeah, he'll be there. I threw a spoke into his machine, but he don't dare yelp. Keep yore eye on Bunty, too. This Sontag and Harrigan think they're smart, buttin' into things that don't concern 'em."

"Started over that damn dog!" snapped Abe. "If we hadn't tied a can on the kid's dog, these two wouldn't never mixed into it. If it hadn't been for the dog, you and Sontag wouldn't 'a' had a fight. And then the old man wanted to adopt the kid, 'cause the kid didn't like you."

"Glub pile!" called One Bum Lung, and they filed into the kitchen.

VI

DIDJA ever read 'Robinson Crusoe'?" asked Sad Sontag, leaning back in a dilapidated chair at the Bar S ranch and looking through a big book, balanced on his knees.

Swede Harrigan squinted through his revolver barrel at the window, decided that it was clean enough, and reached for the oil can.

"Know it by heart," he declared wisely. "It was written on Friday by a man who found tracks in the sand. Where'd yuh get that book, Sad?"

"Found it upstairs. It's probably a book that old man Steeb gave to the kid on Christmas. I ain't read that story for years, and it kinda brings back memories of my childhood."

"Yeah, it must," agreed Swede. "You was eighteen years old before yuh learned to spell yore name."

"Oh, yeah, that's right. Well, it brings back memories of my callow youth. How does that suit yuh?"

"Suits me," Swede shoved the gun into his holster and wiped his hands on his knees. "That danged deputy sheriff shore was careless to let our guns fall in the dust thataway. Say, I wonder what they'll say when we show up at the sale? I dunno whether it'll be just the right thing to do, or not, Sad.

"We don't know how the sheriff feels about it. My gosh, he may be out gunnin' for us right now. He—say, why don'tcha listen to me? You don't seem to care a dang, Sad."

"I was just wonderin'," said Sad thoughtfully. "By golly, it'll be a good way to find out for sure."

"Find out what?"

"What didja say, Swede?"

"Well, now that's sure intelligible," declared Swede. "I suppose yuh found somethin' in that book that'll help yuh out, didn't yuh?"

"Uh-huh—mebbe. When yuh don't know the answer to anythin'—look in the book and see," grinned Sad. "In a couple of hours they'll come out here to hold that sale, and I might read 'em somethin' out of the book."

"I hope Bill Wyatt and his gang shows up," mused Swede. "If the Lord ever did make three danged fools, them are the ones. They're either ignorant, or they've got a lot of nerve."

"They think they're clever," grinned Sad.

"Then this is an awful ignorant settlement. We better get all set before they show up."

And while Sad and Swede got ready to receive them, the delegation rode from Oreana to attend the sale. Several buyers had come from the lower ranges, lured by the chance of buying something cheap.

Bunty O'Neil rode with the sheriff and his assistant, Wheezer. He was in hopes that the sale would bring enough money to pay his notes against the Bar S; but the sheriff assured him that it would not. The ranch itself was not worth over five thousand, and thirty or forty head of cattle would not bring enough more to cover the amount of the notes.

It was doubtful if a buyer could be found for the ranch. The story of the arrest and escape of Sad and Swede had become known, although the steer episode had only been touched upon lightly. Bill Wyatt and his two men rode together, and it seemed that they were unusually quiet of demeanor.

Speck rode with the sheriff, and was still willing to bet his dog that Sad and Swede would attend the sale. Speck had begun to realize that the Bar S was to be sold for debts, and that it no longer would be home to him. Buck Rainey had explained it to him in detail, and a great wrath welled up within Speck against Bunty O'Neil, the man who was indirectly responsible for this loss.

"That shore is dirty work," Speck declared hotly. "Don't I have the worst luck? Lose m' ranch, and then somebody shoots the old man who was goin' to help me out. I hope to gosh that somebody gets paid for all this."

They rode in at the Bar S and dismounted at the big corral near the stable. The sheriff sent Slim Wray and Art Alberts to round up the cattle in the pasture, while the buyers walked around, inspecting the buildings. The sheriff was a busy man, trying to get an opinion on the value of the ranch itself, but none of the cattlemen seemed inclined to make a bid. Bunty sat on the corral fence, gloomy of face, surly of speech. He wanted his money, and he did not care who knew it.

"Close to ten thousand," he wailed, when someone asked him how much the place owed him. "Got the notes right with me.

That's the last time anybody will ever hook me for that much."

"Well, where are all the Bar S cattle?" asked Gilroy, a rancher, who owned an outfit on Bitter River. He arrived too late to find out that the cattle had disappeared.

"Stolen," said Wheezer.

"Stolen? How long since they disappeared?"

Wheezer started to explain, but the boys were bringing the herd; so those at the corral separated and helped swing them in through the wide gate.

"Hey!" called Slim. "There's a Box 8 in that bunch."

"Leave him in," yelled the sheriff. "We can cut him out later."

They shut the gate behind the last animal and prepared for the sale. The assemblage sat down on the top-pole of the corral fence and watched the cattle milling around, seeking an exit. The dust clouded up the scene to some extent, but the men were all old dust-eaters and did not mind.

"There's thirty-nine head," declared the sheriff. "It's a mixture of breeds, ages, et cettery. How much am I bid for the bunch?"

"Three hundred and ninety dollars," offered the Bitter River man. The price of ten dollars per head brought a laugh from the crowd.

"Three hundred and ninety-one," bid another.

"Three ninety-one and two-bits."

"Three ninety-two."

"Wait a minute," begged the sheriff. "My gosh, that ain't no way to bid. Them animals would be dirt cheap at thirty per head."

"I'll give twenty dollars per head."

The sheriff turned quickly at the sound of a familiar voice. Sad Sontag was just outside the corral and behind the men on the fence. Bunty O'Neil tried to turn quickly and almost fell off the fence. Swede Harrigan was standing near Sad, hanging on to the neck of a half filled gunny-sack, a grin on his face.

"Well, I'll be damned!" The sheriff seemed justified in making his statement. He climbed over the fence and faced Sad, who merely grinned and asked the sheriff if his bid was high enough to buy the cattle.

"Hello, Mr. Sontag," called Young Speck from his perch.

"Hello, Speck. How's Boze?"

"He's fine. By golly, I'm glad 'they didn't catch yuh."

Sad laughed and turned to the sheriff. "I hope the old red cow didn't hurt yuh, sheriff," he said.

"Myah!" snorted the sheriff. "You've got yore nerve to come here."

"Not so much. Yuh see, we intended to come to the sale."

"Don't let 'em bluff yuh," said Snipe Lee anxiously.

"Nobody's goin' to bluff me," declared the sheriff.

"Nobody's tryin' to," smiled Sad. "Let's go ahead with the sale."

"Yeah, let's go on with it," agreed Bunty.

For the first time the sheriff noticed that Sad had a big book under his left arm. He squinted closely.

"What's the idea of the book, Sontag?"

"The book of wisdom," grinned Sad. "It might answer a question that's been botherin' me quite a lot. Yuh see, I've been wonderin' who stole them Bar S cattle."

"Are yuh lookin' for the answer in a book?" asked Bill Wyatt sarcastically.

"Mebbe." Sad considered Bill thoughtfully. "Say, we was up to yore place yesterday, after the red steer busted up yore party. You've got quite a place, Wyatt. From the number of Box 8 cattle in the hills, you must be doin' quite well."

Bill Wyatt did not reply, but shot a glance at Snipe and Abe, who were wishing that they were somewhere else.

"Yessir, you seem to be doin' quite well," continued Sad. "You don't brand very deep, do yuh?"

"What do yuh mean?" demanded Bill.

"Just what I said. Beauty may only be skin-deep, but a brand shore ought to go into the epidermis."

"I don't git yore drift." Bill spoke evenly and straightened up slowly. "If this is a sale—let's sell somethin' and have it over."

He climbed down off the fence and leaned against the nearest post. Several more got down, as though tired of their position, and Bunty O'Neil was one of them.

"I made my bid," said Sad. "Is somebody goin' to raise it?"

"Those cattle are worth more than that," declared Bunty.

"Go ahead and bid more," growled Wheezer. "Nobody stoppin' yuh, Bunty."

"I ain't goin' to bid on what already belongs to me."

"Does it belong to yuh?" asked Sad.

"You're damned right it does. I've got the notes to show for it right here." Bunty slapped his pocket. "I've got enough to more than cover the ranch and everythin' on it."

"Lemme see one?" demanded Sad.

"Let yuh see nothin'!"

"I don't believe you've got a note," persisted Sontag.

"Thasso?" Bunty spat dryly. "Well, I have. The sheriff has seen 'em, and so has a lot of other folks."

"Say!" snorted Wyatt. "This is a joke. These men tried to steal a steer from me yesterday, and the sheriff arrested 'em, but they got away. Why don't he arrest 'em again?"

"That's my business!" snapped Buck Rainey uneasily.

"What's the idea, Buck?" asked Gilroy.

"I dunno," Buck shook his head.

"Scared of 'em," fleered Bill Wyatt.

"It was your steer," reminded Wheezer. "Why don't you do somethin', Bill? Are yuh handcuffed?"

"I still think that yuh ought to show them notes, Bunty," said Sad, paying no attention to Bill Wyatt.

"Why?" demanded Bunty.

"I don't believe they're any good, Bunty."

"Yuh don't, eh?" Bunty took an assortment of papers from his inside coat pocket. "Yuh don't think they are, eh? Then take a look at one."

Sad accepted the folded sheet of paper and looked it over. It was a properly constructed ninety day note for twenty-six hundred dollars, and signed by Jim Steeb. Sad opened the book and looked at something on the fly-leaf.

"Was Jim Steeb sober when he signed this note?" he asked.

"As sober as a judge," declared Bunty. "I didn't want any slip in my dealings with him, Sontag. I never let him sign a note when he was drunk. Are yuh satisfied?"

"Nope." Sad looked up from the book and motioned to Speck.

"C'mere, Speck, I want to ask yuh a question."

Speck came willingly enough and Sad held out the book to him.

"Do yuh remember that book, Speck?"

"Sure I do. My dad gave it to me last Christmas."

"Yuh see, gents, he recognizes the book," said Sad. The men nodded. Sad opened it at the fly-leaf. "Was yore dad sober when he wrote that, Speck?"

The boy nodded quickly. "He never was drunk at home, Mr. Sontag."

Sad closed the book, placed it on the ground and held the note out to the sheriff.

"Take a look at that, will yuh sheriff. I'm goin' to ask Bunty to show us the rest of 'em."

"The rest of 'em?" parroted Bunty. "Whatcha mean?"

"The rest of the notes, Bunty," said Sad evenly.

"What for?"

"Because those notes are all signed 'Jim Steeb.'"

"Signed—Why, you damned fool, that was his name!" Bunty hunched forward, reaching inside his coat, as though to comply with Sad's request.

"Yeah, his name was Steeb," said Sad, narrowly watching Bunty. "Anyway, that's the way it's pronounced, Bunty. Yore notes are signed S-t-e-e-b, but on the fly-leaf of that book, it says 'To my little son on Christmas Eve, from his father, and—" Sad hesitated for a moment—"and it's signed James S-t-e-i-b! You dirty coyote, you tried to steal the Bar S, and you probably killed James S-t-e-i-b!"

Bunty's hand flipped from beneath his coat, holding a heavy revolver instead of the package of notes, but Sad suspected that Bunty was wearing a shoulder-holster, and his draw was just enough faster to spoil things entirely for Bunty O'Neil.

Sad's gun spouted lead from his hip, and the bullet yanked Bunty sideways, throwing him to a kneeling position against the corral fence, while the six-shooter flipped away in the dust. His shoulder was broken, but his spirit, after the shock, remained unbroken. He cursed wickedly, but no one cared what he thought. He had admitted his guilt when he drew his gun. Bill Wyatt's eyes grew hard, and he shot a meaning glance at Snipe and Abe.

The sheriff went to Bunty, reached inside his coat and took out the rest of the papers. Bunty cursed him fluently, but the sheriff paid no attention to his profanity. The others crowded around and watched the sheriff compare the signatures on the notes with that in the book. He turned to Speck, a grin on his face.

"Speck, I reckon you get your ranch back. Your dad didn't know how much of a Christmas present he was givin' yuh when he wrote in that book."

"Well, he don't get much, at that," said Bill Wyatt.

"Don't he." Sad grinned at Bill. "Don't he? C'mere, Swede."

Swede came forward, carrying the gunnysack, which he upended and dumped out a fresh skin. It was the hide of the belligerent red steer. Swede spread it out on the ground for all of them to look upon.

"Remember that critter, sheriff?" asked Sad.

"By God, that's one of my steers!" exclaimed Bill angrily.

"Yeah, it shore is," agreed Wheezer. "That's the one we filled with lead yesterday. I'd remember that red steer anywhere."

"What's the big idea?" demanded the sheriff.

"We went back and skinned it," said Sad casually. "You jiggers were so mad that yuh wouldn't even collect the meat. We all had some nice steaks for supper off that animal."

"You got a lot of nerve!" snorted Bill. "Tried to steal——"

"Don't talk out of turn," advised Sad. "Sheriff, I ask yuh to examine that brand, but before yuh do, I'd like to say that we know where the body of old Eph Wyatt is. He lived long enough to help us figure out who shot him.

"Yuh see, he had only one livin' relative. That livin' relative would naturally inherit the Diamond W when the old man died. But when the old man declared his intentions of adoptin' Speck, it was a cinch that Speck would get the Diamond W; so this lone livin' relative—Don't move, Wyatt! Keep yore hands where they are.

"You shot old Eph Wyatt from ambush. You and Bunty O'Neil had a fallin' out; so you stole all the Bar S cattle you and yore gang could handle, and changed the Bar S to the Box 8. You branded some with an iron, but a lot of 'em were hair-branded in yore brandin' chute. You fool, the floor of that chute looks like the floor of a barber-shop after Saturday's work.

"Look at the brand on that hide! Keep yore hands——"

But Bill Wyatt had no idea of putting up a fight. He whirled around and darted for the corner of the corral, but stopped with a lurch.

Standing between him and the corner and regarding him calmly was old Eph Wyatt. For Bill it was like looking at a ghost; the ghost of the man he had tried to kill. Bill stared at him, turned back and walked unsteadily to the sheriff. It seemed as though Bill Wyatt were finished; as though he were surrendering. But he was not.

Suddenly he grasped the sheriff, whirled him around, grasped him by the back of the shirt and shoved his gun into the sheriff's back.

"Keep back!" he snarled at the crowd, who were all in front of him. "Make one fool move and I'll drill Buck Rainey. Now, Buck, yuh can back up. I'm no quitter."

There was nothing for Buck to do, except follow orders. Bill reached down quickly and secured the sheriff's gun. The two began backing away slowly, while the crowd, afraid to make a move for fear that Bill would make good his threat to kill Buck Rainey, stood and watched them widen the distance. Wheezer and Slim had moved in behind Snipe and Abe and quietly taken their guns before either of the Box 8 boys realized what had been done.

"Look at Bunty O'Neil!" gasped Sad. The wounded gambler had managed to get to his feet and had secured his revolver. No one had bothered to pick it out of the dust, because everyone thought that Bunty was too badly hurt to ever attempt to recover it.

Bunty was humped badly, with his right arm swinging loosely, his face the color of wood-ashes, but he was making unsteadily for the sheriff and Bill Wyatt.

"Go back, you damn fool!" commanded Bill.

Bunty shook his head painfully, gripping the heavy gun in his left hand.

"Damn the sheriff!" grunted Bunty. "His life don't mean nothin' to me; I'm after you, Wyatt. You double-crossed me, you coyote!"

Bill swung the sheriff around toward Bunty. He was afraid to swing further, because it would give the crowd a chance to shoot him in the back.

"Go back, Bunty," warned Bill. "I'll kill yuh if yuh don't stop."

Bunty laughed hollowly, but did not stop. He seemed awkward in his handling of the six-shooter in his left hand, and the swinging muzzle was as much of a menace to Buck Rainey as it was to Bill Wyatt.

Suddenly Bill fired at Bunty, but missed him. The bullet tore a splinter from the corral fence, and a steer bawled painfully.

"Your luck is gone, Bill," said Bunty unsteadily.

"Like hell it has! I'll show yuh who's got the luck."

Wyatt and the sheriff were backing faster now. It was evident that Wyatt was trying to draw far enough away to make a break for the brush. The crowd was powerless to stop him, unless they were willing to take a chance on Wyatt killing Buck Rainey.

Bill fired again at Bunty, and this time he did not miss. Bunty almost went to his knees, but recovered his balance. Bill fired once more, but missed, and the bullet caused the audience to scatter.

Suddenly little Speck Steib darted from the corner of the stable, circling behind Bill and the sheriff.

"Don't yell!" cautioned Sad. "Bill don't see him."

Bill Wyatt did not hear Sad's warning, nor did he realize that the youngster had sprawled in the dirt not more than six feet directly behind him. He was too interested in his own getaway, which seemed more probable every moment. If he could hold them back until he gained the brush, the odds would be in his favor.

Bunty was laughing drunkenly, as he reeled ahead. The sheriff knew that death was behind him, and he was almost as afraid of Bunty's erratic gun muzzle as he was of Bill Wyatt's threats. In fact, he was a trifle more worried about Bunty, because he felt that Bill would not shoot him as long as he obeyed orders.

They had backed almost into Speck now, as Bunty's advance forced them to increase their backward pace. Suddenly Bill Wyatt's heels struck the prostrate body, and

the boy's arms wrapped in a tight grip around his boots.

Wyatt cursed viciously, tried to catch his balance, but he had been going too fast. The sheriff backed into him, and they both went down in a heap on top of Speck, while into them, half-falling as he came, fell Bunty O'Neil.

Sad Sontag was running toward them, as Wyatt's heels first struck Speck, and by the time the three men had piled up, Sad was into them, followed by the rest of the crowd, except Wheezer, who was going to be very sure that Snipe Lee and Abe Snow would not escape.

But Sad was not quick enough to prevent Bunty O'Neil from his vengeance. From the midst of the struggle came the muffled thud of a revolver shot, before the crowd could yank them apart.

The sheriff got to his feet unhurt, when they dragged Bunty O'Neil aside; and Speck, covered with dust and blood, crawled from beneath Bill Wyatt, spitting dirt and blinking blindly.

But Bill Wyatt did not get up. The crowd stood around and looked at him and at Bunty O'Neil, who was too far gone to know what it was all about. The sheriff grabbed Speck and hugged him, while Speck dug both fists in his eyes, trying to remove enough dirt to enable him to see what had happened.

Old Eph Wyatt came among them and looked down at his nephew. No one questioned the old man. They just seemed to take it for granted that everything would be explained. Speck blinked at him foolishly, his eyes filled with dust-tears.

"I—I kinda bull-dogged him, didn't I?" asked Speck.

"Boy, yuh shore did," said Buck Rainey. "You done just the right thing at the right time. If there's goin' to be any adoptin' done, I'd like to have a chance at it."

"I reckon I come first," said old Eph Wyatt quickly.

Speck looked at them, a half-grin on his face.

"I'm much obliged to yuh," he said. "I've got to think about it."

"Well, he gets the Bar S all back, don't he?" queried Sad. "It looks to me like you'd have to pick out all them changed brands and turn 'em back to the Bar S."

"Y'betcha," nodded the sheriff. "Speck gets 'em all."

"Snipe Lee says he'd kinda like to talk," stated Wheezer.

"I jist wanted to say," said Snipe, "that me and Abe didn't have nothin' to do with shootin' at the old man. Bill never told us that he did that, but he was awful sore to think that old Eph was goin' to adopt the kid. Bill had an idea of combinin' the Diamond W with the Box 8. I reckon Bill done the shootin', 'cause he rode away that day with a rifle."

"What about the cattle stealin'?" asked Buck Rainey.

"We done it, Buck. When Bill registered that Box 8 brand, he had the idea of stealin' Bar S cattle. It was plumb easy to change the brand to a Box 8. Then Bunty O'Neil came to Oreana. Him and Bill were old friends.

Bunty pointed out that he had a better scheme to get the Bar S ranch, and he said it would be safer; so we quit pickin' up the Bar S cattle. Bunty and Bill had trouble and kinda busted up. It kinda looked like Bunty was goin' to hog the whole works; so we tried to spoil his game by stealin' all the cattle.

"We branded what we could in the length of time we had, but the bulk of the catle are back in a box canyon behind the Box 8, where we were goin' to finish the job. Me and Abe plead guilty right here. We never got a cent for our work, and we didn't steal because we expected to be paid —but to help Bill git even with Bunty O'Neil."

"They're both even now," said Sad. "I reckon there ain't much left for anybody to do. The sale is all off, unless Speck wants to sell somethin'."

"I ain't sellin'," grinned Speck. "I reckon I'll raise cows."

They packed the two dead men on their horses and prepared to take them to Oreana. One of the boys opened the corral gate and let the cattle drift. Speck went back and picked up the scattered notes and the big book, which had proved Bunty's duplicity.

"Are you goin' to town with us, Speck?" asked the sheriff.

Speck shook his head quickly. "No, I reckon I'll stay home, Mr. Rainey. I thought mebbe Mr. Sontag and Mr. Harrigan might stay all night with me and kinda help me git started."

"Speck, you've got the whole town of Oreana to help yuh, if yuh need help."

"Mebbe I have now." Speck was wise beyond his years. "These two men helped me when Oreana wouldn't."

Buck rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "That's right, Speck. They shore ruined yuh for bein' an orphan."

The crowd all shook hands with them, and the cavalcade moved back down the road. Old Eph Wyatt was the last to go.

"I'm glad it turned out the way it did," he said. "I lose a son—mebbe. If we could combine the two ranches, it might be a good thing for both of us. I'm gittin' old, and I need a young man around the place."

"I'll be over," said Speck. "Mebbe we might work out a deal."

The old man laughed and rode away. Speck led the way to the porch of the ranch-house, still carrying the book and notes. He sat down and the two cowpunchers sat down on each side of him, while he looked over the papers.

"I can't read much," he confessed sadly. "Yuh see, I never had much chance to go to school. Dad worried a lot about it. He said that education was somethin' I needed pretty bad." He opened the book at the fly-leaf and squinted at the penciled writing.

"What does that say?" he asked.

Sad squinted curiously at the boy and shot a quick glance at Swede.

"It says, 'To my little son on Christmas Eve, from his father, James Steib.'"

"Uh-huh." Speck grew thoughtful as he looked at the notes. "Is my father's name written on these, too?"

"Sure. They forged his name, Speck."

"Yuh mean that they wrote it on without him knowin' it?"

"That's the idea. Yuh see, Bunty knew he was in bad when I showed him the name in the book. I had an idea that he was a crook, but it took a lot of schemin' to prove it."

"Uh-huh." Speck hardly understood. He pointed at the writing on the fly-leaf. "Who wrote that?"

"Well, I—uh—your father must 'a'—" Sad shifted his feet and looked appealingly at Swede, whose eyes widened humorously.

"That's kinda funny," mused Speck. "Yuh see, my dad never knew how to write. He was ashamed of it and never let folks know. That's why he always wanted me to learn."

A short lead-pencil in Sad's pocket seemed to grow warm and he shifted nervously.

"But—but his name was spelled S-t-e-i-b," said Sad. "I seen it on an old letter I found in the house."

"Mebbe," nodded Speck. "Ma could read. After she went away, me and Dad had a hard time. I don't sabe who wrote that stuff in the book, 'cause Dad couldn't."

"Let's figure it was fate, Speck," said Sad softly.

"Who is fate, Mr. Sontag?"

"He's the guy who tied the tin can on Boze."

"Aw, that was Bill Wyatt."

"Yuh can't see fate, Speck."

The kid nodded, got to his feet and walked into the house. Sad tore the fly-leaf from the book, wadded up the notes, put them in his pocket and got to his feet.

He and Swede looked at each other and grinned knowingly.

"Will we head for Sundown, or stay a while and see that the kid gets started out right?" asked Sad.

"Mebbe," grinned Swede, "we better leave it to fate."

So fate nodded and they decided to stay.

ZULU PRIDE

By L. PATRICK GREENE

Author of "The Hat Trick," "With One Stone," etc.

DEEP IN THE AFRICAN JUNGLE, THE MAJOR CHANCES UPON THE FORGOTTEN REARGUARD OF A GREAT, TRIBAL MIGRATION. THESE ARE ZULUS, AND THOUGH THEIR OWN FOLK DENY THEM, FIERCE PRIDE AND LOYALTY HOLD THEM INFLEXIBLE EVEN TO MUTILATION AND DEATH ITSELF

"I TELL YOU, white man," the naked, grease daubed native said tonelessly, "that I do not know where rubber is."

The white man whistled softly a few bars of a song at that time immensely popular in the London halls. Presently he stopped whistling and sang a bar or two of the chorus; "Ta-ra ra boom de ay!"

"And I have no ivory, white man." The native broke in on the song.

The white man looked quizzically at the native and then at the collection of squalid huts which formed the village over which the lanky, emaciated native was chief.

"I can well believe that," he said softly, and he spoke the vernacular as fluently as the native. "Yes, I can well believe that, M'Mandi."

The white man rose slowly to his feet and picking up the large handkerchief on which he had been sitting, shook it and put it in his pocket. Then he strolled unconcernedly about the *kraal,* wondering not a little at the fear in the eyes of the old women and at the strange absence of younger women; hurt because the children —they all had the distended stomach, the sunken eyes and pipe stem limbs of semi-starvation—ran screaming away at his approach. He was puzzled, too, at the absence of menfolk. There were none save M'Mandi and a few graybeards so old that they could do nothing but sit in the sun and exchange mournful reminiscences of the days of their youth.

He stopped inadvertently before the grain store hut, all faculties concentrating on an attempt to discover the reason for the cloud of gloom which hung over the village.

"And I have no grain, white man," said a voice at his elbow. The native who had followed the white man as he wandered aimlessly about the place, now was standing behind him.

The white man turned about quickly and, taking a monocle from the breast pocket of his white, silk shirt, toyed with it absently. "That, too, I can well believe, M'Mandi," he nodded slowly. "Never have I seen such hungry looking children! But why? You are of Zulu stock——"

"Truly," the man said proudly. "When Mzilikazi broke away from Chaka and came north, at that same time Manikos broke away also and traveled north, but not with Mzilikazi. Aye! He settled in this country and made himself a great chief. He drove the Portuguese dogs—" M'Mandi broke off suddenly and cringed as though expecting a blow. "Your pardon, white man," he said humbly.

"It is nothing," the white man denied slowly. "But still I do not understand how you came to this way of desolation. Manikos was strong, his warriors were many and powerful. Now Manikos is dead, true, but his son M'Zila is yet stronger. His people go up and down the land—and they do not look fearfully behind them, as you do."

"The white man knows many things. He should know, too, that a few among many are helpless, long years ago Manikos left my father in this place with certain warriors and their women. My father's duty it was to guard the back of Manikos, who went on and forgot my father and the warriors left with him. But, because Manikos ordered, 'Stay and guard my back,' my father stayed behind and built this *kraal*. For a few years he ruled the country as if he were king, enslaving the M'Hlengwe people who lived in these parts, giving their maidens to his warriors. By and by, the jungle growth and jungle ways choked his warriors' strength and courage—we are not jungle people, we Zulu—and the M'Hlengwe ceased to fear us. A little later they became our masters, for they were many and we few. Also the Portuguese dogs——"

Again M'Mandi paused and cringed, looking in amazement at the white man when the expected blow did not fall. "And the Portuguese dogs," he repeated, brazenly this time, "also took toll of us. And so we became as we are."

"Yet M'Zila is alive and strong," the white man suggested. "He would not, perhaps be deaf to a plea for help."

The native's eyes flashed, he drew himself erect with an imperous gesture. "Zulu blood is in my veins, white man. And a Zulu does not cry for help. Also," he added lamely, "M'Zila is deaf. Once we sent word to him and he did not answer."

"Perhaps the message never reached him."

"Au-a! But it did, white man. Our messenger returned to us after many moons and M'Zila had dealt harshly with him. His right eye had been put out, his right ear was gone and his right arm cut off at the shoulder. This was the answer M'Zila sent to us: "You are no true Zulu, so why should I help you? Too much M'Hlengwe blood flows in your veins; you are only half Zulu. That part which is mine, I will protect—as I protected this messenger dog. The part that is mine, I keep. So much I will do for any other of you to come to me."

"Au-a," exclaimed the visitor. "A harsh man, M'Zila."

"True, white man, and just. But none other of my people ever desire to taste more of his justice." M'Mandi smiled bleakly, then added in a matter of fact voice, "As for the messenger, we killed him; for, after M'Zila's pruning, *he was all M'Hlengwe* and had no place among us!"

The white man nodded, fixed his monocle in his eye, took out his handkerchief again and, spreading it carefully on a large, upturned calabash, sat down. For a while he gazed reflectively at his well polished brown riding boots, the native standing expectantly before him. "Sit down, M'Mandi," he said presently and, when the native, surprised into a betraying ejaculation at this courtesy on the part of any white man, obeyed, took a bag of *gwai* (Boer tobacco) from his pocket and tossed it to the Zulu.

"Au-a baba!" M'Mandi exclaimed as he eagerly clutched the bag. "And it is all mine, white man?"

"Truly."

The white man rolled himself a cigarette, lighted it and puffed in lazy enjoyment. "I really shouldn't smoke," he murmured in English; "at least not until I'm sure of my ground. And I'm not; far, far from it. But there are so many beastly smells about this place. Old M'Mandi himself is no bloomin' violet; quite the opposite, in fact.

"Wish Jim 'ud come. 'Fraid the old bounder's having the deuce an' all of a time with the mules. Perhaps I should have stayed with him. But of course not. I had to come ahead, to spy out the land as it were.

"I believe old M'Mandi would like to be quite chummy—but he's afraid to be. Scared of the Portuguese, most likely. They're a messy lot. Don't know how to treat natives at all.

"Wonder what the old blighter's up to now?"

The native suddenly had jumped to his feet and had vanished into one of the huts. He no longer could keep the story of this so strange white man to himself.

Hitherto, in M'Mandi's experience, white men meant only unjust taxes, brutality, the burning of huts and the ravaging of women. Never before had he met a white man like this one; so tall and strong, so stern and yet so soft. Never before had he met a white man who gave him kind words, and presents.

He emerged from the hut again pres-

ently, carefully carrying in his two hands a small calabash. He knelt down before

the white man and handed him the calabash. It contained beer, a thick, evil smelling brew.

The white man drank deeply, through closed teeth that he might strain from the beer the foreign matter which floated in it, conscious that the native was watching him closely. "That was good, M'Mandi," he said at length, handing the calabash back to the native. "If I die," he added in English, "I'll have only myself to blame. But the old blighter evidently thinks so highly of it that it 'ud never do to let him see that I thought it filth—oh, quite that!"

"The white man was saying?" M'Mandi asked curiously.

"That he had never drank better beer; it was a true Zulu brew."

M'Mandi bridled with pleasure. "Ah, white man. M'Zila was wrong. We are still more Zulu than M'Hlengwe. We have not forgotten the old ways." He peered into the calabash; it still was half full. "But has the white man had all he requires?" he added anxiously.

The other waved his hand airily. "Enough, M'Mandi. I was not thirsty; and the little I had, because of its great excellence, sufficed. You will finish it?"

"Truly!" And M'Mandi put the calabash to his mouth and with much smacking of lips registered great satisfaction. Presently he called an old graybeard to him and gave the man the calabash.

Although his attention appeared to be riveted elsewhere, the white man noticed that the calabash still contained as much beer as it had when he had handed it to M'Mandi. In other words, the chief only had pretended to drink. That was cause for much thought.

As if answering the unspoken doubts in the white man's mind M'Mandi said apologetically, "We are very poor, white man. This season the crops failed us and we have very little corn to spare for beer. So, what beer we have we save for men like you; for men who *are* men!"

"It is understood," answered the white man softly. "It was a man's courtesy, M'Mandi."

"By what name shall I call you, white man?"

The visitor laughed. "Among my people there are some who call me 'Major,' others, 'Aubrey St. John' and still others, 'the damned monocled dude'!"

"'M'Mhahja — A'bree-sing — domed-mon—" M'Mandi stumbled over each of the names. "And what mean they, white man?"

"They have no meaning. It is not our custom to name a man for what he is."

"A foolish custom, M'Mah— *Au-a!* Already the names have gone from me."

"My servant—he is a Hottentot—calls me *'Baas'*."

"Baas! Ah, that is easier. And what does that mean?"

"Master, M'Mandi."

M'Mandi shook his head. "It is a poor name, white man. Now I—I shall call you Inkosi, for surely you are a big lord among your people. And when I speak of you to others, your name will be *Mushla Ameyhloe,* for truly your eyes are straight and nothing is hidden from them."

They sat for a while in silence, each well satisfied with the other's mettle. The children having lost their fear, played happily in the dirt; women passed to and fro about their tasks, looking inquisitively at the white man. But still no young men or girls appeared. Apparently the *kraal* was inhabited only by the very old and the very young. And the man called the Major knew that this could not be; and was curious to know the explanation of the absence of the young men and maidens. Perhaps the young men were hunting, the maidens working in the corn patches; perhaps they had all gone to a beer drink at some distant *kraal.*

He wanted to ask M'Mandi all about it, but knew that if he showed too great an interest in the affairs of the *kraal,* he endangered the friendship just formed with M'Mandi.

Instead he said slowly, "I came here, M'Mandi, a stranger, seeking little, asking nothing. You said: 'I do not know where rubber is. I have no ivory. I have no grain.' Now, I had not asked for ivory or rubber or grain—and I shall not ask. Then why——"

"What then do you want of us, *Inkosi?*" M'Mandi interrupted. It was inconceiv-

able to him that a white man should not have some wants; very expensive wants, generally.

"I wanted to buy, maybe, a little corn meal, at a good price. I wanted to arrange to leave my horse—" he pointed to a coal black stallion standing drowsily in the shade of a nearby hut, "and my mules with you. I wanted to hire young men to carry my baggage—at good pay—to Lourenço Marques."

M'Mandi's eyes opened very wide. "The *Inkosi* jests, surely. He wants to buy, to *hire?* He does not take without asking permission? What sort of white man are you?"

"Is it so strange, M'Mandi, that a white man should deal justly?" the Major asked softly.

"Truly!" M'Mandi looked at him closely before asking abruptly, "And if you leave your horse here— as indeed you must, for there is no way for it to travel beyond this place of mine, the jungle is thick, the flies many—how will you travel? Will you need men to carry you in a *machilla?*"

"I am no woman," the Major answered tersely. "I have feet. I can walk."

"Wo-we!" M'Mandi exclaimed. "What a fool I am. Now I know the truth. You are no woman; neither are you a Portuguese. That people always travel in a hammock as if they were, indeed women. You are —" he hesitated. "You are of that race which—it was even so in my father's father's time—sends out its young men in ones and twos to conquer the far corners of the earth. I have heard of your people; much that is good, a little that is evil. And I, fool that I am, thought you were a Portuguese!"

"No! I am not a Portuguese. But yet I do not know why you told me, 'I do not know where rubber is. I have no ivory. I have no grain.'"

"I said that, *Inkosi,* because I thought you were a white man of that other race. Their foot is on our necks; we are their slaves. They always are seeking those three things, and evil always follows their search. They do not ask, they take. They do not pay, save with blows and abominations. So it was, that when word was brought us by a herder that a white man approached, I sent all my young men and all my young maidens—the comely ones —into the bush and came to meet you alone. For I am old, and these others, too, are old. It mattered not what happened to us, or to the children. But the young men and maidens, they are the heart of a race. They must live. *Aie!* I thought it strange when you came riding alone, unattended, for never have the white men whose dogs we are come to us that way. But I was cautious, fearing a trap."

"What is there to fear, M'Mandi? The country is at peace."

"And do you not yet understand? Come with me, *Inkosi.*"

M'Mandi led the way to a narrow path leading out from the *kraal* into the steaming jungle growth. They walked along it a little way and came presently to a clearing. Under the vines and rank grasses which already were beginning to hide its nakedness, the Major could glimpse the charred embers of what once had been huts; here and there the skeletons of cattle gleamed white against the oily green of the verdure and blackened soil.

"Three moons ago," said M'Mandi sadly, "my son's *kraal* stood in this place and he, in some way that is not known to us, displeased the white men who are our overlords. That same day his *kraal* was put to fire, his cattle destroyed and burned. Aye! They would not permit us even to fill our bellies with the meat. His grain became smoke. And then, when it seemed that the fires of their wrath must needs be appeased, they fed to the flames old men, women and children!"

"And your son, you and your warriors permitted this evil?"

"My son and his warriors were in chains. As for me and my people, what could we do? We were held in check by the sticks whose voice is thunder and whose tongue is lightning. We could have died, but to what end? Would our dying have aided these others who already were dead?"

"True," the Major murmured. "And your son and his people? What happened to them?"

M'Mandi shrugged his shoulders and spread his hands expressively. "Who knows? They went from here; the jungle swallowed them up. It is not well to inquire too closely into the sharpness of a poisoned assegai!"

The two men slowly retraced their steps. Halting near to four old men, M'Mandi pointed out that each had only one arm.

the other member evidently had been amputated clumsily at the elbow.

The Major took his monocle from his eye. His jaw set firm. The vacuous expression vanished from his face. "And you tell me, M'Mandi," he said slowly, "that a *white* man did these things?"

"A white man, or the half-caste dogs who bark for them," M'Mandi said bitterly. "It is enough that he did not call off the dogs."

Then he shrugged and laughed softly, casting aside thoughts of yesterday's evil; ready as are all Africa's black children, to accept things as they come. They are incapable of dwelling too long on the past; indifferent to what the future might have in store; content with the present, if the present is good; happy in the sunlight though seeing only the darkness if the sky is overcast. Africa knows no twilight!

And so M'Mandi laughed softly. "My young people will believe that evil has befallen us," he said. "I keep them waiting too long." He crossed to a tree under which was the big signal drum which he struck sharply three times, a pause, then twice more.

Hardly had its deep booming note died away when the bush about the village echoed to the sound of joyful shouts and high pitched, girlish laughter. Presently the Major was conscious of a rustling all about the place. In ones and twos young natives, the men armed with spears and knobkerries, materialized, it seemed, from nothingness. They had, thought the Major, been close at hand all the time. When he had walked up the path with M'Mandi, he doubtless had passed within arm's length of some of them. And he had been at their mercy had their intentions been evil.

He counted twenty men, a puny lot save for one or two who had pure Zulu characteristics and physique, and nearly twice that number of girls. They all looked at the white man with awed curiosity, then occupied themselves with various tasks. Some started to tan skins, others thatched the roof of a hut. Seven of the maidens, calabashes balanced on their heads, left the *kraal* by a broad, well defined path which led to the river.

Marveling at their graceful carriage, the Major watched them until the last one vanished from sight round a bend in the trail. Then he turned and surveyed the other occupants of the *kraal*. Something of the peace and tranquility of the life got hold of him. For a little while he forgot this people's sorrows, their constant struggle for existence against the natural perils of the bush. He forgot their hopeless struggle against the white man's civilization which was throttling their lives just as much as the jungle growth threatened to overrun and choke their corn patches.

It all was very peaceful. The song of the girls on the way to the river had a lilting humored cadence; it harmonized with the songs the men were singing as they worked. Childish laughter, the soft, musical voices of the women, the deep voices of the old men, all accentuated the atmosphere of rest.

The Major chuckled softly as M'Mandi took a knobkerry away from a little four year old who was in danger of braining himself as he made a brave attempt to flourish it after the manner of a warrior. It was a small incident, yet it brought home to the white man more strongly than anything else could have done, that the similarity of people goes further than the Colonel's lady and Judy O'Grady. He thought there was very little difference between the people of this small *kraal* and those of a village at home. Fundamentally they were the same; only the externals were different.

The Major leaned lazily against the side of a hut, M'Mandi close by, enjoying it all; conscious of nothing save a happy people playing in the sun. But then a memory of the destroyed *kraal* and the one-armed men came to him. The veil of happy contentment was brushed aside. And now the low drone of a myriad insects drowned all other noises. They had been there all the time but only just now he was conscious of them. The menacing voice of the jungle sounded blatantly.

A shriek, quickly stifled, brought all the men folk to their feet; the women looked at each other fearfully. M'Mandi moved a few paces nearer the white man.

"What was it?" the Major questioned, noting their alarm, his hand resting on the butt of his revolver.

"It was the voice of one of the maidens who went for water," M'Mandi answered slowly. "Perhaps a crocodile has taken her." He and the other men waited expectantly, tensed.

There followed a deep, pregnant silence. No one spoke, no one moved. Gradually the tension lessened. Men shamefacedly returned to their tasks. The women emerged from their huts into which they had fled. M'Mandi squatted on his haunches close by the Major, and struck playfully with his knobkerry at a passing younster. "It is nothing to trouble us," he said in response to a questioning glance from the Major. "She was frightened, belike, without just cause. Maidens are like that, seeing danger where none is. They——"

And then with a startling suddenness a man, wearing a flamboyant, gold laced uniform, came into sight. Close behind him, reclining in a *machilla* carried by four uniformed natives, was a white man. Behind the *machilla* marched a detachment of native troops. In their midst were a number of prisoners—among them *six* of the seven maidens who had gone from the *kraal* to get water.

That was all the Major saw for, with a fierce yell of, "You've trapped us!" M'Mandi leaped to his feet and brought down his knobkerry with great force on the visitor's head. The Major's knees sagged under him. He pitched face forward to the ground and lay there unconscious.

Meanwhile, at the first appearance of the strangers, the young men and women of the *kraal,* had fled hither and yon panic stricken, intending to seek the shelter and safe hiding place of the jungle. But, to their alarm, they discovered the *kraal* surrounded by black soldiery, who roughly herded them back to the center of the *kraal,* prodding the laggards with their bayonets.

And now the gorgeously uniformed man spoke to the man in the *machilla* who nodded gravely and then rolled out—he was pig fat—and waddled toward the inert form of the Major. The newcomer was a ludicrous figure. Standing a little less than five feet six, clad in gaily patterned silk pajamas, his white pith helmet completely hid the top of his face. His bare feet were thrust into high heeled, womanish looking slippers. His mouth sagged open and he wheezed loudly, a black, walruslike mustache fluttering outward with each exhalation.

As he came to where the Major was lying supine, motionless, he prodded him with his foot and with some effort turned him over. Then he laughed softly and called the other man. "Do you know this one, Carlos?" he asked in Portuguese.

"No, *senhor,*" the other replied harshly. There was queer inflection in his speech, a muddiness which matched his *café au lait* complexion; that went well with the soiled whites of his eyes and his short, crisp hair which showed a tendency to curl despite the grease with which he had plastered it. "Undoubtedly he is a trouble maker, like all the English. Perhaps he is the slaver we have been seeking for so long a time," he concluded meaningly.

"So?" questioned the fat man in surprised tones. And then, with a chuckle. "You think fast, Carlos. I did not know what you meant, at first. But, of course! I take the man to Lourenço Marques and tell His Excellency, the Governor, that here is the slaver for whom we have so long been searching. His Excellency will reward me greatly, and will forget his so unjust suspicion that I am the slaver! So shall we be free to continue our so profitable—er—ventures. Ah, yes. So clever of you, Carlos!"

He rubbed his plump, white hands together. Then, taking off his helmet—the top of his head showed entirely bald, save for a long, well-greased black lock which was so arranged as to show to the best advantage—he mopped his red face. As he did so he looked with cold, calculating eyes at the *kraal's* inhabitants. Each of the latter endeavored to avoid his scrutiny.

He laughed again and returning leisurely to his *machilla,* seated himself. "Have the slave runner guarded," he ordered.

With evident enjoyment, the man called Carlos transmitted the order to two of the black soldiers, who expertly trussed up the Major, and, with fixed bayonets, stood guard over him.

"Bring M'Mandi here," the fat man next ordered. It was curious how quiet the *kraal* people were. Not one had moved, or talked above a whisper since the arrival of the Portuguese force. Now they watched breathlessly, with eyes which held hate as well as fear, as two of the soldiers dragged their chief up to the *machilla* and forced him to his knees.

One of the soldiers brought the butt of his rifle down with bone breaking force on

M'Mandi's back, and a low moan—like that of a dangerous beast, wounded and at bay—burst from the men of the *kraal* and they pressed forward, against the bayonet points of their guards.

The fat man rolled his eyes apprehensively.

"Quiet, dogs," Carlos shouted, "or your chief dies!" He held his revolver to M'Mandi's head.

The murmuring ceased. The men relaxed, no longer straining to break through the barrier of steel; once again they became a cowed and subject people.

"It is all right, now, Don Pedro," Carlos said with a sneer. "The dogs have come to heel."

The color flowed back into Don Pedro's face. Sitting up with an assumption of dignity, he said to M'Mandi, in a soft, lisping voice. "I have heard many complaints of you and your people, M'Mandi. I did not believe them. It was not possible, I said, that a man should be so ungrateful to such a good friend as I have been to you."

"My son's *kraal* is no more; that is the proof of your friendship, white man," M'Mandi interrupted.

Don Pedro spread his hands expressively and laughed like a muted hyena. "Oh, that. Yes. Carlos told me about it. If a child is disobedient, a good parent punishes him; it is for the child's good. Your son was disobedient, and so he was punished. But what of you? Senhor Carlos tells me you give him much trouble; you are too stiff necked, I think."

"I do not know where rubber is," M'Mandi began, then stopped realizing the futility of it.

"I could not believe you were so evil," Don Pedro continued, "so I came here to see with my own eyes. And, alas! I saw that the reports of you were all too true. Before my eyes you dared to strike a white man. Perhaps you have killed him, who knows? For that there must be great punishment." He paused and looked up at Carlos triumphantly.

"Clever, Don Pedro," that man said in tones of sycophantic sweetness. "I never could have thought of that. It makes everything most just."

The little fat man smiled and made a purring, throaty noise. "Yes, there must be a punishment," he said complacently and folded pudgy hands over a rotund stomach. "You say you do not know where rubber is, M'Mandi. That is sad. But it is an old story. You also would have said that you had no ivory, no grain, no young men or maidens. That is sad. That means you cannot pay a fine and must be punished in some other way."

He turned to Carlos. "It is cold. No? Let us have a fire, just a very little fire to warm us."

Carlos, his eyes gleaming with a malicious light, shouted sharp staccato orders and some of the soldiers, flaming torches in their hands, ran from hut to hut, sowing the red seed of fire.

With a yell of dismay, M'Mandi broke from the hold of the men who were guarding him and, running to his hut, entered. He emerged immediately, bearing in his hands the calabash from which the Major had drunk. This he carried with faltering steps to Don Pedro and offered it to him as if it were some priceless treasure. "It is all we have, white man," he said. "It is yours. Be merciful."

Don Pedro took the calabash and raised it to his lips; then his nose wrinkled in disgust and he gagged violently. "You would poison me," he yelled, and threw the contents of the calabash full in M'Mandi's face.

As the chief staggered back, half blinded, Carlos hit him on the head with the barrel of his revolver. The old man dropped like a log, moaned and was silent.

"It is time that we go, Don Pedro," Carlos said. "In a little while it will be too hot."

The fires which the soldiers had started had taken good hold and each hut was blazing fiercely. But, save for a scattered curse, the people of the *kraal* were silent; even the children accepted the disaster which had overtaken them with mute, stoical indifference. Satan, the Major's horse, moved away from the hut near which he had been standing and whinnied in alarm, calling the attention of Carlos to him. "May I have the horse, Don Pedro?" he asked.

The fat man nodded.

Carlos walked quickly over to the horse and taking hold of the bridle, endeavored to lead the spirited animal away. But Satan reared and struck out viciously with his forefeet, then swerved sharply, pulling the reins out of Carlos's hands, and galloped swiftly away.

"He seemed not to love you," Don Pedro said with a chuckle. "He is a white man's horse. But now let's go. It is very hot." He fanned himself gently with his helmet.

"The soldiers are thirsty for blood," Carlos rebelled in a sulky voice; he resented Don Pedro's gentle reminder that he was not a white man. "There are a lot of old men and women who are of no value," he continued. "Let us——"

Don Pedro shuddered delicately. "You are so savage, Carlos; and you are too lenient with your men. Some day you will regret having taught them the joy of killing. In any case we have no time to waste now in idle amusement. We will take all the people from this *kraal,* old men and young children. They all shall go. Doubtless we can turn them to some profit. Come! Let us start."

Carlos glowered. He looked as if he were about to remonstrate further with Don Pedro and then, thinking better of it —he knew from experience that the fat little man was dangerous to cross in spite of his soft exterior—he bowed agreement, turned and gave the necessary orders.

Quickly the soldiers lined up the people of the *kraal,* shackling them together, and marched them down the broad pathway leading to the river. Four of them picked up the Major, who still was unconscious, and placed him on a crude, roughly constructed litter.

Five minutes later the *kraal* was deserted save for M'Mandi, who had not moved from the place where he had fallen.

Twenty minutes later M'Mandi groaned and rolled over; the hut nearest him had been the last to burst into flames, but now the heat from it was intense.

Presently he sat up and groaned, opened his eyes and groaned again. With dull, uncomprehending eyes he watched, one after another, the huts cave in and collapse with a muffled roar, sending up a fountain of sparks.

The cur dogs of the *kraal,* yelping in fear, their tails between their legs, crept belly down out of the range of the heat; scrawny fowls clucked and crowed in dismay; snakes, so suddenly and violently deprived of their nests in the roofs of the huts, crawled peevishly away into the jungle.

M'Mandi rose slowly to his feet, and with hands outstretched before him staggered down the broad pathway, calling to his people. A little way he went, only a little way, and then his legs refused to support him any further. They crumpled, and he slumped heavily to the ground.

Ten minutes later the *kraal* was not; the fire had burnt itself out; only a mass of blackened, smoking ruins remained where once had been huts and the home of a tribe.

A dog timidly returned, sniffing eagerly, smelling, no doubt, the cooked carcass of a fowl which had been trapped in the fire. But the ashes still were hot, and he ran yelping away, creating a panic among the other dogs who were waiting in the jungle beyond. They fled with him.

A bold, but foolish rooster flew clumsily down from a tree on the outskirts of the *kraal.* He alighted on a jumble of smouldering calabashes, moving them slightly, creating a draft. They immediately burst into flame. The rooster squawked once and then was silent. The *kraal* was a place of death, deserted, desolate.

Hours passed. The ruins ceased to smoke. The sun dropped quickly toward the western horizon. Jungle gloom was triumphant.

And now M'Mandi moved again. He sat up, rubbing his eyes in bewilderment. He wondered, vaguely, why his head throbbed so painfully; what was the matter with his right shoulder and thigh.

Presently he remembered the coming of the first white man whom he had named, *Inkosi—Mushla Ameyhloe.* He remembered the coming of those others—the white man, the black soldiers and the man who was neither white nor black—and of how he had struck down *Inkosi.* A foolish deed, that, he commented bitterly. He must hasten to make amends to *Inkosi,* beg his forgiveness.

He blinked and rubbed his eyes again. Other memories crowded upon him. He remembered everything now. The blow which caused his head to throb, the firing of the huts, the heat which had caused the skin to peel from his shoulder and thigh.

He rose to his feet and walked slowly back along the path, not sure what he would find; hoping that one or two of the huts would remain untouched by the fire, that some of his young people had escaped and would be on hand to greet him.

When he came to the place where the *kraal* had been, he made no outcry. *"Au-a!"* he said softly. That was all.

Then he wandered dismally from one blackened heap to the other, apparently oblivious to the still hot ashes which must have scorched the soles of his naked feet. Occasionally he raked among the embers,

as if hoping to find something untouched by the fire. But this act was purely mechanical.

He came to the tree where the signal drum hung. The drum was untouched, though blackened by the fire. He tapped it tentatively. Then he struck it again, loudly, sending out the old return signal; three quick beats, a pause, two more beats.

But the drum's booming was a hollow mockery; there was no one to answer its call. M'Mandi waited for a few moments, listening, and then, his head bowed, walked slowly away. He turned presently into a path—not the one leading to the river—which wove its way through the jungle growth to some far distant *kraal*. After he had gone a few hundred paces he stopped and looked back. The path had made several abrupt turns, so his eyes met nothing but the green slime of the jungle. There was no indication that a people recently had enjoyed their life nearby; nothing to bear witness to a white man's brutal injustice. The material evidence of that crime was hidden from sight by the tangle of creepers and grasses; as completely hidden as knowledge of it would be kept from the governor of the Territory.

A few paces further on and M'Mandi halted again. His quick ears detected the approach of a newcomer along the path. He looked around quickly for something he could use as a weapon, picked up a stone about as large as his two fists and, stepping quietly off the path, hid himself behind a tree. Then, having taken stock of his surroundings, making sure that there was no obstacle in the way of a quick leap out to attack, if the situation so demanded, selecting a path of retreat for use should he be faced by superior force, he leaned against the tree-trunk. Partly relaxed yet every nerve tensed, he waited.

Presently the noise he heard resolved itself into the hoof-beats of two animals. One, he judged, was lame. A little later and his keen, sensitive ears detected a man's tread. Still he waited.

A voice sounded. It was a harsh, unmusical voice. A moment later two mules, one of them very lame, both in very poor condition, came into view around a bend in the trail. Close behind them walked a squat, powerfully built native. He wore a battered felt hat. Through a hole in the crown he had stuck an ostrich feather. A gaily colored shirt was tucked into a pair of tightly fitting riding breeches behind, but in front hung down, outside, reaching almost to his feet. In his right hand he carried a knobkerry and two assegais; in his left, a pair of brown, pointed toed shoes. The base of his nose was abnormally wide even for one of Bantu stock; and his cheek bones were high and prominent.

Just before the mules came opposite to M'Mandi's hiding place, the squat man stopped. Lifting up his left foot he examined the sole carefully. Then he raised the other foot and from it extracted a large thorn.

M'Mandi straightened himself carefully, stood back a little from the tree and tightened his grip on the stone.

The mules had halted and were nibbling dispiritedly at the long, rank grass,. One of them brayed mournfully. The stranger carefully placed his shoes on the ground, then straightening and shifting his knobkerry and one of the assegais to his left hand, he called softly, "I come in peace. Why hide behind a tree? I am only one. What need to take me unawares?"

M'Mandi vouchsafed no answer, did not move from cover.

"If you desire my blood," the other continued, "come out and take it. Let us fight as men should, face to face."

M'Mandi hesitated a moment longer then stepped out on the path, still holding the stone poised ready to throw. "You have good eyes," he began.

The other chuckled. "My nose saw you," he said. "My ears saw you. My eyes were blind. I can not see through a tree. But the grease you use is strong. You breathe like a pig. Well? Are you thirsty for my blood?"

"Nay," M'Mandi answered decidedly. "I have seen enough of evil this day. If you come in peace, so be it. And if you seek my blood, why, so be that too." He threw the stone into the bush. "But what do men call you? What is your tribe?"

"I am of no tribe," the other said with a grin, his teeth showing pearly white against the blackness of his skin. "Though, truly, my *baas* always speaks of me as 'Jim, the Hottentot.' From the south——"

"*Baas*'—'Jim, the Hottentot,'" M'Mandi cried. "I have heard somewhat of you!"

Jim grinned again. "Then you have seen my *baas*. Is he not a man? Perchance he sent you to guide me to him."

M'Mandi shook his head sorrowfully. "Aye! He is a man indeed. I called him *Mushla Ameyhloe.*"

"There you prove yourself to be no fool, old one," Jim exclaimed enthusiastically. "And discovered you also that he is the friend of all black ones?"

"Aye—and then thought my judgment false."

"Therein you were a fool!"

"True. But I discovered it too late."

"Too late?" Jim looked at M'Mandi closely and noted the blood which had flowed down his face from the scalp wound and had dried there. "What mean you by, 'Too late?' Where is my *baas?*"

"I do not know. He has gone on. Maybe he is dead."

"Dead? How? Did you—" Jim raised his assegai threateningly.

M'Mandi did not flinch. "No," he said. "I do not think I killed him though, it may be, through my folly he will die. Come with me."

He turned and led the way back to where the *kraal* had been, driving the mules before him.

"*Au-a!*" exclaimed Jim dispassionately as he viewed the ruins. "And whose hand was this?"

"Hear me to the end, O black one called Jim, and I will tell you. Judge not too hastily—and yet I judged hastily," he added in sorrow.

"Speak quickly," Jim bade irritably. "My *baas* will need me. I must go to him." The two men squatted on their haunches, side by side.

"Listen then!" And without further preamble M'Mandi told Jim of all that had happened. In an unemotional voice, he told of a village laid waste, of a people enslaved, as matter of factly as if he were telling of some remote, inconsequential event in which he had no interest.

"*Wo-we!*" Jim cried mournfully when M'Mandi had finished the recital. "You acted the part of a fool, M'Mandi. When you struck down my *baas,* causing the heavy sleep to fall upon him, it was as if you, yourself had committed all the evil which followed. He could have saved you."

"He was only one," M'Mandi interrupted. "They were many. What could he have done?"

"You do not know my *baas.* He is all wise, all powerful. He is the Mahjor and I—I am Jim, his servant." He jumped to his feet. "But why do I stay here," he demanded excitedly. "I must go on and take my *baas* away from those wicked ones. And heed this, O fool named M'Mandi. For this little while I will forget the blow you gave my *baas.* But, if I find him dead, then—then I shall return, and death will not come easily to you!"

M'Mandi's eyes flashed, but he answered quietly, "It will be most just. I was beside myself."

Jim spat contemptuously and turned away.

"Wait!" M'Mandi cried.

Jim halted. "What is it, dog?"

"Wait until morning before you follow the trail. In a very little while now it will be dark, so dark that you can not see your hand before you. Rest now and eat, if you have food. Then, in the morning, we can follow the spoor quickly."

Jim looked at the sky and considered the matter thoughtfully.

"It might be well," he muttered. "In the darkness I am as a child in this country. Also I am hungry and very tired. I have trekked far since the rising of this morning's sun. The *baas* will understand." Aloud he said, "It is good counsel, M'Mandi. Here I will stay and eat and sleep. In the morning I——"

"Not you alone, black one. I will go with you. It may be that I am old, and a fool, and a dog—of that last I am not so sure. Zulu blood flows in my veins and, so my father told me, the Hottentots were always slaves of the Zulus."

"I am slave to no one," Jim retorted hotly. "save to my *baas.* And that is an honor too great for you to understand, dog."

"Let it pass. But this is true. I know this country as well as I know the palm of my hand. The man does not live who can follow spoor as well as I."

"A loud bark from a little dog," Jim commented dryly, and without further words unpacked the mules and hobbled them. A little later the two men were eating ravenously, huddled close up to the fire for, with the setting of the sun, a heavy dew had fallen and there was a chill in the air.

While they still were eating four natives from a distant *kraal* came to the place. These men had seen the flames from the burning huts earlier in the day and had come to investigate. They listened sympathetically to M'Mandi's story, but balked

at his request that they should join forces and help release M'Mandi's people.

"Nay," said one. "This is your bone. We will not chew it for you."

Jim, they regarded with suspicious interest. Was he not confessedly a white man's dog? Nevertheless they eagerly accepted the food and the trade stuff he gave them, promising, in return for the gifts, to care for the mules and the rest of the provisions.

They accepted this responsibility a little too readily to please Jim, but he was in no position to question their motives. So he was forced to content himself with making a charm over the mules and the equipment, telling the men that if they broke the *tabu,* death in the most painful form surely would follow.

They were greatly impressed and asked Jim to repeat the charm. He did so with portentous gravity, rolling his eyes fearfully, making mystic passes in the air—they were strangely like the flourishes the Major made when rolling and lighting a cigarette! "Gor blessmi Dammeyes, no. If I don' see you s'long, hullo," the charm ran, almost exhausting Jim's English vocabulary.

"Au-a, baba! A powerful charm, surely!" exclaimed one of the men.

"Great indeed," Jim agreed. "The evil spirits are now all around us—" He broke off suddenly. There was a snorting and a heavy crashing in the jungle just beyond the *kraal* clearing.

The men looked at each other, drew closer together. On their faces was an expression of fear, a dread of the supernatural. When they noted that the charm maker himself was alarmed, their teeth began to chatter like castanets. Presently Jim's face lighted. "Have no fear," he said importantly. "It is only my *baas's* horse which the spirits have brought to you. Did not the charm put all my *baas's* possessions into your keeping? Sit still and watch."

He stood up and whistled a low, sweet note. He was answered by a soft whinny; a dark shadow emerged from the darkness of the jungle and moved with mincing steps to where Jim was standing. There entering the radius of light thrown by the fire flames, the shadow ceased to be a shadow and became a horse. It muzzled Jim fondly as he took off the saddle.

"It is time that you go now," Jim said and, unhobbling the mules, helped the men load the equipment in the pack saddles. That done he gave Satan's bridle reins into the hands of one of the men. The horse snorted and hung back until Jim spoke softly to him; after that he followed the man meekly.

"Remember the charm," Jim called out, "and tend the beasts well. In a little while I will come to your *kraal* and hold you to a strict accounting."

"We will not forget, O charm maker," one of them shouted. Then the jungle blackness swallowed them up; but for a long time Jim and M'Mandi could hear the songs they sang to ward off the evil spirits.

Presently M'Mandi, having in mind the morrow's trek, turned over on his back and slept, snoring loudly.

The hours passed slowly; stars waxed and waned. Jim did not move, but sleep was far from him. He sat with his chin resting on his updrawn knees, gazing steadily into the glowing embers of the fire, planning how best to rescue his *baas* —his *baas,* who could do no wrong.

THE MAJOR grinned impudently into the face of Carlos the Goanese, the half caste, creature of the high born Don Pedro. "You're a filthy beast, you know," he drawled. "Glad you speak English. I can't *buk* Portuguese well enough to slang you as you ought to be slanged."

Carlos swore and kicked the Major in the ribs. "My blacks will have much sport with you by and by; they will make you come crawling to me and you'll be ready to lick the dust off my shoes—*anything* to get away from my niggers!"

"You—er—niggers have to stick together, eh, what?" the Major commented casually.

Carlos's eyes narrowed; his face flushed a queer, mottled crimson under his yellow, jaundiced skin. "I am no nigger, you swine," he yelled. "I am white, as white as you are."

"Really! I never would have thought it. You act and talk just like a—er—Goanese, you know. You're quite sure——"

Carlos did not allow the Major to finish his sentence, but yelled curses and threats at him.

"Well, 'pon my word," the Major

drawled when Carlos was forced to pause for lack of breath. "That's very much like Goanese talk. If, on the other hand, you're a white man—why, then, you're the most abject rotter I've ever met; quite an out and outer, I should say." And then a memory of the things he had witnessed during the past three days overwhelmed the Major, broke down his icy barrier of reserve and a cold flood of vituperation and condemnation poured from his lips. His eyes flashed angrily. From a mild blue they changed to a hard, steel gray. At that moment the Major was a remorseless killer, and Carlos, sensing it, flinched visibly.

Then as suddenly as it had started, the Major's stream of condemnation ceased. He became on the instant a dude, a hopeless, ignorant seeming nincompoop. "No, I won't," the Major now said slowly, enunciating each word with great clarity. "I wouldn't be a partner of yours for all the ivory and niggers to carry it, in the world. Neither will I buy my freedom by murdering Don Pedro. How could I kill the dear man?" he chuckled, softly. "Why I have never been introduced to him. Who is he?"

A shadow fell across the Major's body—a strange, distorted shadow. Carlos started back in dismay and the Major, turning his head slightly, saw a queer apparition. He stared hard, blinked, then burst into a peal of laughter. "Really!" he gasped admiringly. "That's positively tophole, Mr.—er——"

"I am Don Pedro," the apparition snapped pompously.

"Oh! The chappy this worm wanted me to murder, eh? I'm not sure that I blame him!"

"It's a lie, Don Pedro," Carlos shouted indignantly. "He is a liar. He——"

"That will do, Carlos. You may go. I will talk with this so wicked slave dealer alone."

"But," Carlos stammered. "He will tell you lies. And, if I am not here to deny them—how will you know that they are lies?"

"Go! I am no fool." Don Pedro pointed imperiously to the line of campfires about which the soldiers and their prisoners were squating, eating the evening meal. "Go!" he repeated and Carlos slunk away, muttering angrily to himself.

"And now," Don Pedro said to the Major. "We will talk."

"That's nice of you, old dear, but—you'll pardon me, I'm sure—I do want to say how clever that getup of yours is. I must have one like it; oh, *positively*! Let me see how it's arranged, will you? Turn around, there's a good egg."

Solemnly Don Pedro turned himself about, and then snorted wrathfully because he had been so weak, so susceptible to flattery, as to expose himself to the Major's barbed shafts of satire.

"Ah, I see," continued the mocking drawl. "You have a wire hoop attached to your helmet, from which you suspend the mosquito netting. Around your waist you have another hoop—a much wider one—which keeps the netting from touching you. And then the bottom part of the netting is reinforced by—er—calico, is it? —and made into pajama trousers. Quite neat! 'Pon my soul, you should have it patented!"

Don Pedro nervously twirled the ends of his moustache and glared down fiercely at the Major. "You talk a lot," he said.

The Major sighed. "I'm afraid I do. So many people have told me the same, that it must be true. But that getup of yours absolutely demands eloquence, you know. Just fancy! It makes it impossible for any nasty insect to get at your precious hide and sting you. But—er—doesn't your bally conscience ever give you a sharp nip? Eh?"

"That's enough," Don Pedro interrupted sharply. "I will do the talking now. Who are you? What is your name? What are you doing in this territory?—Well, why don't you answer?"

"I thought you wanted to do the talking, old dear," the Major replied sweetly.

"Answer!"

"But first tell me who you are? What right have you to question me?"

"I—I am Don Pedro D'Andra. I am the Resident in charge of this district."

"The deuce, you say. That's splendid. You're the chappy I want to see. You must have that man, Carlos, you called him, didn't you? Well you must have him arrested at once. He has committed the most frightful crimes."

"So-a! You surprise me. I had always considered Carlos a very just and lenient man. But if he has been guilty of any crimes, he shall be punished, I assure you. What has he done?"

"Well, first of all, he knocked me out, nearly broke my skull."

"You're quite wrong there. M'Mandi did that."

"He did? Why, I thought he was a most friendly old soul," the Major exclaimed in surprise. "You are joking, perhaps?"

"I speak the truth. I do not joke!"

The Major was nonplussed, and not a little hurt at the thought of M'Mandi's treachery.

"At any rate," he continued, "Carlos has kept me a prisoner for three days, bound hand and foot—I must be most frightfully dirty—when I asked him why I was a prisoner, he treated me vilely. I must be all black and blue from his kicks. Deucedly uncomfortable, I assure you."

"That is to be regretted," Don Pedro said suavely. "But then, you are a so dangerous character, that our dear Carlos has to be a little stern with you. Is that the sum total of your complaints?"

"In respect to myself, yes. But I do not count. I have other, infinitely more terrible charges to bring against this fiend, Carlos." The Major's tone was very much that of a pigheaded, professional reformer with a real grievance to gloat over. "I understand from Carlos, in fact he boasts of it, that he killed M'Mandi, set fire to his *kraal* and brought all the people away, prisoners. And, you know," the Major lowered his voice to a whisper, "I believe Carlos is going to sell them for slaves."

"M'Mandi was killed because he—as we thought—had killed you; I know that he tried to poison me. And for that we punished him, burned his *kraal* to the ground and took his people prisoners. How else could we instill a proper respect for a white man in the minds of this so savage people? All that was done at M'Mandi's *kraal* was done at my orders. Yes?" He paused, waiting expectantly.

The Major breathed deeply, exhaling with a sharp hiss. "Ah, I see," he exclaimed presently. "You explain everything so charmingly. I am beginning to look upon Carlos as quite an angel of mercy—oh, quite. But how, I wonder, are you going to explain his murder of the old man—in cold blood, mind you!—yesterday, the woman he shot this morning; how will you excuse the brutal way in which he flogs the prisoners with a *sjambok?*"

"I do not have to explain it," Don Pedro answered mildly. "But please, senhor, rest assured that Carlos does not exceed his authority He would not dare to do that. You see he is answerable to me for all that he does, and I—I am answerable to no one."

"Not to His Excellency, the Governor?" the Major queried mildly.

Don Pedro shrugged his shoulders. "If he knew, then perhaps things would be unpleasant. But he would have to have definite proof. He dare not act on suspicion alone. I have friends, most powerful friends at—how do you say?—at court."

"I think, 'Dog' Pedro," the Major's tone and facial expression were very insulting; even more insulting than his words, "you must be a Goanese, too."

With startling swiftness, Don Pedro produced a revolver from somewhere and aimed it at the Major's head. Then he replaced it with a sneering laugh and the Major noticed that he kept it in a holster slung under his armpit, inside his pajama coat.

"Glad you thought better of it," the Major drawled. "It 'ud be a pity to shoot a hole in your nice mosquito netting; and there are quite a swarm of the beastly pests abroad tonight."

"Yes. I'm glad, too, that I did not act on a hasty impulse," Don Pedro said softly. "You are much more valuable to me alive—for a little while longer at any rate."

"May I ask just what you intend to do with me? Of course, you understand, my government will take this affair up with your government. This sort of thing can't go on, you know. And I'm afraid things will go very hard for you."

Don Pedro laughed.

"Your government will never bother to inquire about you; they won't know what has happened. You see, you will be imprisoned in the jail at Lourenço Marques; and white men do not live there very long."

"So you're going to take me to Lourenço Marques, eh? How jolly. I was on my way to that delightful town. And what charge will I be tried on—I suppose you'll go through the formality of a trial?"

"You're a slave dealer," Don Pedro answered tersely. "At least that will be my evidence. I shall testify that I caught you *in flagrante delicto,* and my evidence will be all that is necessary."

"Seeking to divert suspicion from your-

self, eh? Ah, well. I always say that if one means to be a rotter, one should be a thorough rotter. No sense in doing the thing in a half hearted fashion."

And now Don Pedro remembered that certain questions he had asked some time previously, remained unanswered. He repeated them. "What is your name? What are you doing up here?

"My name is Aubrey St. John and I came up here on a hunting expedition."

"Alone?"

"Of course not, my dear ass. But I got lost, separated from the rest of my party, don't you know, and wandered about——"

"You're a liar," Don Pedro interrupted.

"Yes, of course," the Major assented. "You did not expect the truth, surely?"

"I insist on the truth, you fool. Don't you see that I have you entirely at my mercy? And I allow nothing to stand in the way of what I want. A word of suggestion to Carlos and—" He drew a pudgy forefinger suggestively across his throat.

"Quite melodramatic, aren't you?" the Major murmured. "But I'm afraid you put too much faith in Carlos."

Don Pedro looked at him sharply. "Sometimes I look at you and think you're a fool. Then again there is something about you that makes me think that there's more than appears at first. I wonder which is the real you."

"Oh, I'm awfully clever, really. You must not think me a fool, except that I sometimes credit white men—some white men—with having more decency than they actually possess. Now, take for example my faith in you——"

"Have done," Don Pedro advised him sourly. "And now, having admitted that you lied a little while ago, suppose you tell me who you really are?"

"I wonder," the Major murmured, "if I ought to tell him." Then in a louder tone, he said, "I am the Major. You have heard of me, perhaps."

"The Major?" Don Pedro echoed. "Of course! I should have known." He had heard of the Major. There were few men south of the Zambezi—or north of that mighty river, for the matter—who had not heard of that dandified, monocled dude who, as a protest against the unjust laws regulating the diamond mining industry, had become an I. D. B., to the despair of all the police in the country. And his fame was not confined to illicit diamond buying. He was respected universally and admired by men who could see beyond his silly ass pose and dudish attire, and knew that he used the languor, the inanities of a fop as a stalking horse behind which his active brain schemed and planned. Even the police admired him and took in good part the tricks he turned on them.

"The Major," Don Pedro said again. Then asked suspiciously, "And what's your little game?"

"No game at all, dear lad. I came up here on a strictly business venture. Oh yes, diamonds of course. You see, a very charming young friend of mine, Miss Lola de Sousa——"

Don Pedro started slightly.

"What?" exclaimed the Major, noticing the start, his eyes narrowing. "You know Miss Lola?"

Don Pedro nodded. He knew Lola very well; had, with her aid, put through quite a number of unsavory deals. He knew her to be a clever, unscrupulous and very beautiful woman. If the Major was a friend of Lola's, or better still, infatuated with her, then it would be well to consider very carefully before he carried out his original intention concerning his disposal of the monocled one.

"Well," continued the Major. "Miss Lola was in trouble and she gave me a little package of diamonds which she asked me to take for her to an address in Lourenço Marques. That was just before the police arrested her on suspicion of being an I. D. B. Fortunate for her—oh, very—that she had given me the stones. Otherwise she'd now be languishing at the Breakwater, or whatever the female equivalent for that dour place is, and be likely to languish for a long, long time. That would be sad, for she is so beautiful."

"And where are the diamonds now?" Don Pedro asked. He was willing to accept the Major's statement as true. It sounded so like Lola. The Major was not the first to discover her alluring charms irresistible. He, Don Pedro, had. "Where are the diamonds!" he repeated sharply.

The Major opened his eyes wide. "That's just it," he said wearily. "You chappies were so eager to burn down the *kraal* that I never got a chance to talk to you. I wanted to

very much. But every time I asked Carlos for his master, he got quite angry and insisted that he would carry any message I had. But I didn't quite trust him, you know."

"The diamonds," Don Pedro insisted. "I am here now. Tell me where they are."

"Oh, but I couldn't do that. I can show you where they are though. You see, I expected to stay at M'Mandi's kraal for quite some time and not wishing to carry the stones about with me—I was afraid I'd lose them, don't you know; or that some one would search me when I was asleep—and so I hid them in a very cunning hiding place. No one would ever think of looking for them in the place I put them."

Don Pedro swore. "Are you lying?" he demanded.

"My dear fellow! Why should I?"

Don Pedro considered this. Then, "It would be very foolish of you to lie," he said softly.

"Of course! So, I suggest this. That we depart secretly in the night from this place and return to M'Mandi's *kraal.* It can't be a very long trek, as we've been circling about a good deal, I imagine. Then, once we've got the diamonds, we'll make for Lourenço Marques—alone. I've told you before that I don't trust Carlos. And I think we ought to start tonight before Carlos gets up sufficient courage to stick a knife into you."

"You suggest that I travel with you, alone, through the bush in the darkness——"

"Why not, old bean? I'm no murderer. But what's that?" A loud, harsh cry sounded from the jungle. "Oh—foolish of me!—it's only a Goaway bird."

At that moment the crisp report of a rifle thudded against their ear drums; a bullet ricocheted near Don Pedro's head with a vicious *pee-whang;* and around the fires, silhouetted against the setting sun, men were struggling in a confused mill.

Another report sounded and one of the black soldiers crumpled up. Carlos's voice could be heard above the din. He was swearing, threatening, pleading. He broke from amidst a group, revolver in hand, and crouching, backed away slowly; and at each backward step he took, his revolver spat fire.

With a curse, Don Pedro tore the mosquito veil which shrouded his form and ran, with surprising agility for so fat a man, toward the scene of the combat drawing his revolver and firing into the air as he ran.

With an effort the Major sat erect and watched; chuckling happily when Don Pedro gave Carlos a backhanded blow as he passed him.

"Down, *baas.* Down and roll this way!" a voice whispered hoarsely from the bushes to the Major's left.

The Major wasted no time in obeying the summons. "Good old Jim," he murmured as he rolled. "I knew he'd find a way."

Three times he rolled completely over, finally coming to a rest, almost touching the stalks of the bush from which the voice came. A long, muscular arm protruded through the leaves and a knife gleamed in the hand. Quickly it severed the bonds on the Major's feet and hands. Then the arm was withdrawn.

"Rub my ankles, Jim," the Major whispered, "and keep good watch."

"Nay, *baas.* Come now. They will never find us in the jungle."

"No, Jim. There's a game yet to be played."

"It is a game with death, *baas,*" Jim grumbled; but his two hands came out of the bushes and he gently and expertly massaged the Major's ankles.

"That is good, Jim. What are the fighters doing now?"

"It is all over, *baas,* or nearly. The fat man is clever. They listened to him when they would not listen to the man who is neither white nor black."

"Ah!" the Major raised his head slightly and saw that order of a sort had been restored and that Don Pedro was in hot argument with Carlos.

"Did you bring a gun, Jim?"

"Tchat! I had nearly forgotten, *baas.* Here." He thrust a revolver into the Major's hand. The latter, as he took it, saw with dismay that it was not loaded. But he did not let Jim know that. It would almost break the faithful Hottentot's heart if he knew that he had failed so badly. The lack of ammunition called for a new plan of operation. He was tempted for a moment to take Jim's counsel and seek safety in flight.

Then he said quietly, "Make it look as if I am still bound, Jim."

Unquestioning, Jim obeyed. When he had finished, the Major rolled carefully back to his original position. "What game do we play, *baas?* Is there to be a killing?"

"Maybe many killings, Jim," the Major said seriously. "But we play the game

carefully, hoping that there will be no need for bloodshed. Wait for my word always. You have an assegai?"

"Two, *baas;* a knife and a knobkerry also."

"Good. Now talk for a little while, until the fat man, or the other one, comes this way."

"And if they come together, *baas?*"

The Major sighed. "If they come together, Jim, there will have to be a killing. But what of yourself, Jim? For these past two days I have known you were near. The Goaway bird cried many times, and once I thought I saw you peering out of the jungle grass as we passed."

A low chuckle came from the bushes.

"When I came to the *kraal* of M'Mandi, *baas,* and that fool told me of what had happened——"

"Then he is not dead, Jim?"

"Nay, *baas.* But he nearly died at my hand when he told me he had struck you down."

"Why did he do that, Jim?"

"Because he thought you had betrayed him and his people to the evil white men."

"I see," the Major muttered in English. "The poor devil." Then, in the venacular, "Go on, Jim."

"There is little to tell, *baas.* I gave the *baas's* horse and the mules and all the provisions into the keeping of men of another *kraal*—but first I made a charm so that they would deal honorably with the things —and in the morning M'Mandi and I followed the spoor of the men who had carried you away.

"It was easy to follow, *baas,* and we two, traveling light, traveled quickly. Soon we caught up with you and ever since have been circling around you—now in front, now behind; to the right and to the left. And—*au-a, baas!*—that M'Mandi is a *schlimm* one. Time and again he put the fear into the hearts of the black soldiers.

Aye, he worked on their fear of the evil spirits. He put signs for them to see everywhere: A pile of stones here; there a broken bough placed just so; here an empty gourd, upturned, directly in the path he knew they would take! there a bunch of feathers hanging from the limb of a tree under which he knew they must pass. At night he made strange noises——"

"I heard them, Jim, and thought evil spirits were about."

Jim chuckled. "I was nearer to him than I am to you when he made those noises, *Baas,* and I, even I, trembled and looked over my shoulder. Aye, a man is M'Mandi. I have forgiven him somewhat for the blow he, in his ignorance, gave you. But had I found you greatly harmed, M'Mandi would have died. He granted me that right.

"Last night M'Mandi made his way past the sentries and talked with some of his people. They told him many things. How that there was an enmity between the fat man and that other; how some of the soldiers were losing stomach for the things they had to do. The signs of evil M'Mandi had placed in their way were working on them.

"So, when they made camp to night, M'Mandi again went to his people, openly this time, and by cunning talk caused trouble between the soldiers—setting the men of this tribe against the men of that —and encouraged his people to show fight. That was to give me a chance to come to you and— But quiet, *baas.* They are coming this way; the fat man and that other."

The Major cursed softly. "They've stopped again," Jim continued in a lower tone. "The fat man is angry. He is sending the other back to the soldiers. He comes on alone."

"Good!" the Major breathed in relief. "Be ready, Jim."

"Ready, Baas. All the time while we rested, M'Mandi and I, I put edges to my assegais. They are very sharp."

For a moment the Major could hear nothing but the confused murmur of voices about the fires; then he heard the footsteps of Don Pedro and his labored breathing.

Presently Don Pedro was standing over him. "And there are more crimes for you to report," he said suavely. "That is, if you live to report them. Carlos was very hasty. He killed four of our soldiers, and that is to be regretted. He also killed two prisoners, but they were only old women so that does not matter."

"What was it all about?" the Major asked wearily, as if he realized the hopelessness of his situation.

Don Pedro shrugged his shoulders. "Does it matter? The soldiers have been very high strung the past few days, the superstitious fools! And Carlos was a

little harsh with them. To make matters worse, the prisoners got a little out of hand—the guards have been too easy with them—and *phau!* Like a match touched to dry tinder, the trouble blazed up. It took fire—" he patted the bulge under his pajama coat meaningly—"to put it out. I'm afraid you'll have to report my atrocities too."

The Major groaned. "You're a bloodthirsty devil, Don Pedro. Is there no decency in you? No feeling, no pity?"

"None at all, Major. Remember that."

"Yes, I'll remember that," the Major said tonelessly. "But how about my proposal. Do we go to M'Mandi's *kraal* for the diamonds? If we do, we ought to start tonight in about an hour's time. Shortly after sundown. And if we're going, I wish you'd cut me loose. I want to get a little circulation in my arms and legs, they're bally stiff and I won't be able to walk."

"You are very funny, Major. Almost I believed your story about the diamonds you hid at M'Mandi's. But before I do anything so foolish, I'm going to search you very, very carefully."

He laughed as he saw the look of chagrin on the Major's face. "I'll go halves with you," the Major offered despairingly.

"You are in no position to bargain," Don Pedro reminded him. "I take all."

"But you'll spare my life?"

"Who knows. Where are the diamonds?"

"In my right hand tunic pocket."

Don Pedro stooped, and finding that too much of an effort, got down on his knees, his eyes shining with greedy anticipation. Then his mouth sagged wide open, his eyes bulged alarmingly.

"It must be rather disconcerting," the Major said with a chuckle, "to find the man you're going to rob—thinking him bound and helpless—quite able to take care of himself. And I assure you that I am and this *really* is a revolver and I'm quite a good shot, awfully good. But no doubt you have heard that?"

Don Pedro had, and remembering what he had heard made no attempt to reach for his own weapon.

"And now you'll do exactly as I tell you," the Major stated coldly, all the fun gone from his voice. "Of course you may have heard that I've never killed a man in cold blood. But then, *you're* not a man! Stand up! Keep your hands down."

Don Pedro obeyed, rising ponderously from his knees.

"Now back slowly toward that bush. That's right; back further. That's enough. Jim!"

"Yah, *baas?*"

"Take his revolver from him and throw it here. It is under his arm, beneath his coat."

Jim's arm came out from the bush and explored, with no gentleness, Don Pedro's chest.

Finding the revolver he took it from its holster and tossed it to the Major.

"Has he any more weapons on him, Jim?"

"No, *baas,*" Jim said, and the Major broke the one he had. Satisfied that it was loaded in all chambers, he threw his own revolver at Don Pedro, hitting him in the stomach, so that he sat down suddenly with a gasp like the wind soughing from a big bellows. But his wits were all about him. He was sitting on the revolver the Major had thrown at him. Presently he planned to maneuver so that he could get it into his hand. And then——

"It's not loaded," the Major said sarcastically. "Stand up! I've got a lot to do."

And Don Pedro stood up.

"Hold your assegai firmly against his back, where the flesh is soft, Jim. If he moves, drive it in."

"Yah, *baas.* I hope he moves."

Don Pedro flinched as he felt the prick of the assegai.

"Vindictive devil, Jim; isn't he?" the Major remarked pleasantly. "And he has a strong arm. I've seen him kill bulls with one spear thrust. Now call Carlos. No quaver in your voice, mind; no little signals, unless you are very tired of life. Like you, sometimes I can be absolutely ruthless and conscienceless."

"Carlos!" called Don Pedro. "Come here." And despite the Major's warning he could not keep a quaver out of his voice.

The half caste sprang up from his place near to one of the fires and walked swiftly toward the Major. Some of the soldiers started to follow him but shrank back to the fires at a shouted order from him.

"What is it?" he asked in a sneering voice as he neared. "Have you thought

better of it and decided to let my black dogs have this swine to play with?" Then he halted, came on a few steps further—very slowly—his eyes darting from the prostrate form of the Major, to that of Don Pedro cringing against the bush. His suspicions were aroused. His beady black eyes darted from one to the other. He saw something in the Major's right hand, and then the meaning of it all came to him. Don Pedro had hired the Major to kill him! There could be no other explanation. Then, before the Major could make a move, Carlos's hand leaped to his revolver, drew it and fired, shouting, "You swine! And that is how you would get rid of me!"

Don Pedro doubled up, his hands pressed to his stomach, then sat down heavily, as a man sits in a chair which is not there. On his face was an expression of hurt surprise, like that of a child who is having some digestive trouble resulting from an unwise meal of stolen green apples. His hands were still clasped across his stomach; between the fingers blood oozed slowly.

Before Carlos could fire again, the Major's revolver spoke. The half caste's weapon was jerked out of his hand as if pulled by some invisible string, and the man gazed mutely at his limp, useless hand.

At the same time the Major leaped to his feet, retrieved the other's revolver and ordered sharply, "Sit down close to Don Pedro, with your back to him. Quickly."

Carlos meekly obeyed. It seemed as if the wound—only a superficial wound—had taken all the spirit from him. Like many bullies raised to a position of authority, given the power to maim and kill, now that he saw that authority taken away from him Carlos became a cringing coward.

"Now tie their hands together, Jim."

"It is done, *baas,*" Jim announced. "But I think there was no need to tie up the fat man."

"No, Jim?" the Major said absently. He was anxiously watching some of the black soldiers who were approaching to investigate the shooting. "Why not?"

"Because he is dead, *baas.*"

"Dead!" the Major exclaimed. He was conscious of a feeling of regret, of irritation. Don Pedro was not deserving of such a clean, easy death. "Halt," he cried to the advancing soldiers.

They came on steadily, relentlessly. He jumped back, putting the bodies of Carlos and Don Pedro between him and the soldiers. Jim joined him, his assegais gleaming red in the rays of the sinking sun.

"Tell them to halt, Carlos," he ordered and thrust his revolver against the half caste's ribs.

"Halt," Carlos cried in a piping, tremulous voice.

The soldiers wavered and halted. One of them came forward alone. He was a big, powerful native.

"Don't let him come near me," Carlos said, his teeth chattering. "He hates me. It was only because that he was afraid of Don Pedro that he did not kill me long ago. And now Don Pedro is dead——"

"You killed him," the Major said tersely. "But that is good," he laughed in great relief. "That is what I wanted to know. Guard the white man closely, Jim."

"My spear is over his heart, *baas,* and will be ready."

The Major nodded approval and went forward to meet the native.

"Your name?" he asked.

"Simba. Sergeant Simba" —the native said truculently, gazing intently at the Major. "Sir" he added after a pause.

"Then know, Simba, that I have been sent by the great white chief at Lourenço Marques because word of the evil these two men were causing you to perform, had come to his ears."

"Au-a! We had fears that way. But what then? Does the great white chief send out only one against so many?"

"Is there any need of more? Don Pedro is dead, killed by Carlos—the man who is neither white nor black. And Carlos is my prisoner."

"True. But we are here, and we are many."

"And your death is here, should I need it," the Major countered. "And yet it is of no value to me—see." He very ostentatiously stuck his revolver in his waist band and, after fumbling for his monocle —frowning with annoyance when he discovered that it had been smashed into many small pieces—thrust his hands nonchalantly into his trousers pockets.

"You could kill me," he said. "You could kill my servant—but what could you do with all those others?" With a wave of his hand he indicated the jungle about them. Long, mysterious shadows, night

shadows, moved there as the grasses bowed before a passing breeze.

Simba shifted uneasily. He had a lively remembrance of the portents which had crossed his path during the last two days. "What do you want of us, white man?"

"You must free the captives you have taken and acknowledge me as your commanding officer; giving obedience in all things."

"Is it permitted that I speak with those others?"

The Major hesitated.

"If their word is 'No,'" Simba added, "I will come back to this place and all shall be as it is now."

"It is good. You are a man, Simba."

The sergeant nodded, turned away and joining the other three, returned to the fires.

The Major waited impatiently, a little nervously; not quite sure what course to take should the decision of the soldiers be against him. The shadows lengthened; in a little while it would be dark. It was a weird setting for a tragedy, for death: The jungle noises, the flickering light from the camp fires, the voices of the men raised now in angry protest, now in agreement.

The Major turned around and looked at Jim; he smiled as he noticed the shoes which Jim carried strung about his neck. Then his eyes fell on Carlos and the huddled, lifeless heap that had been Don Pedro.

Carlos looked at him. "You won't give me to Simba?" he pleaded.

"I don't see why I shouldn't," the Major answered curtly.

"They are coming, *baas,*" Jim said quietly.

The Major whirled quickly, every muscle tensed. Then he relaxed, for in the half light he could see that Simba's face was one broad grin. "We are your men," he shouted, "if you promise to speak for us to the white chief at Lourenço Marques."

"That I promise you," the Major said quietly. "Now give orders that some dig a hole in which to bury Don Pedro. Others shall guard Carlos—and he is not to be harmed," he added quickly noticing the expression of grim satisfaction on Simba's face.

"It is an order," Simba said sorrowfully. "And what will you do, white man?"

"Why I," the Major spoke slowly, reveling in the luxury of anticipation, "I will shave and bathe and help myself to such of Don Pedro's clothing as will fit me. I will eat and then sleep."

That night, after he had dined sumptuously in the well-equipped tent which the luxury loving Don Pedro considered essential, the Major ordered M'Mandi to be brought before him.

"I was a fool," that man said dejectedly. "My life is yours."

"I give it back to you. The blow is forgotten. It is another matter I wish to speak to you about. What think you of this place for a *kraal?*"

"It is good, *Inkosi.* The ground is high, the water pure. The soil is fertile. Once the jungle growth is cleared——"

The Major waved his hand in dismissal and M'Mandi, somewhat puzzled, left the tent.

Early the next morning the Major addressed all the people, soldiers and their late prisoners. His remarks were forceful and quite to the point. As soon as he was finished, there commenced a great laboring; each one had his task allotted to him and work progressed apace so that, by nightfall, a large area of ground had been made clear; hut poles cut and trimmed and reeds for thatch cut.

Ten days later the work was finished. Where had been a jungle, now stood a *kraal* of many huts encircled by a stout pole *scherm.* M'Mandi and his people were very happy, if tired. They had worked hard, but the soldiers had worked harder, and the Goanese, Carlos the half caste, had worked hardest of all. The Major and Simba had seen to that.

Now the Major was ready to leave with the soldiers and Carlos, for Lourenço Marques. There the Major intended to report to his excellency the governor on the evil ways of the late Don Pedro and Carlos. He regretted that Don Pedro, the greater villain, had escaped his just punishment.

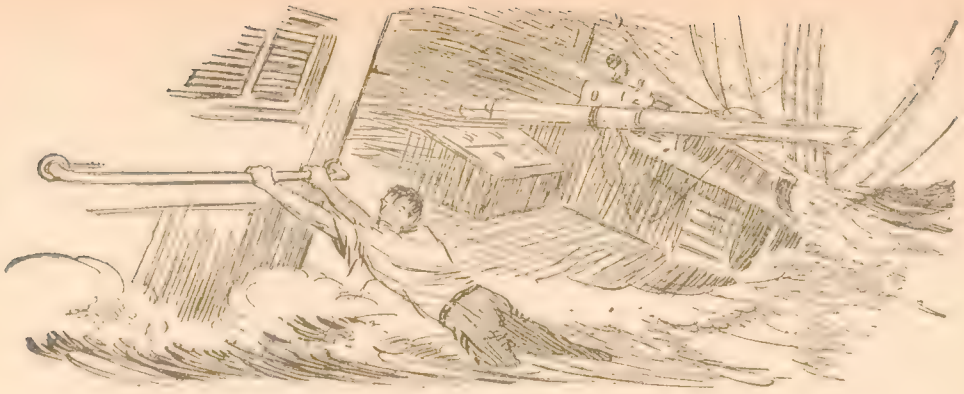
He had also some business in that seaport that had to do with diamonds which had been given to him by a certain Lola de Sousa.

"Yes," he said to Jim, as they left the place of Mushla Ameyhloe, for so M'Mandi insisted on calling his new *kraal,* "I'm glad they didn't search me."

From his pocket he pulled out a handful of diamonds. They were not beautiful, looking like pieces of common, dirty glass. But men have murdered for less.

"It's a great game, Jim."

"Yah, *baas.* The greatest in the world." And neither man had in mind the game of I. D. B.



FIGHT!

By GEORGE ALLAN ENGLAND and EDWARD J. PENNEY
Authors of "Dice of Destiny," "Hate," etc.

FOULLY SHANGHAIED ON TO A NEWFOUNDLAND BARKENTINE, ASHTON HAD ONLY ONE PLACE TO LOOK FOR HELP. AND THAT WAS IN THE DEPTHS OF HIS OWN GREAT FIGHTING HEART. WITH WHAT HE FOUND THERE HE CHOSE TO FACE ALONE A WHOLE SHIP'S COMPANY, HUNDREDS OF MILES OF DESOLATE ATLANTIC AND A DEATH MORE HORRIBLE THAN MOST, RATHER THAN QUIT

UNDER a pale northern sun that vaguely pierced the August fog of St. John's harbor, the Newfoundland barkentine *Gauntlet* was loading salt cod for New York's hungry maw. Cap'n Lemuel Bowring, black bearded and ugly jawed, stood on the poop deck listening to the bang and rattle of the winch, watching the 'longshoremen at their sweaty labors. To judge by the cap's glowering frown and by the savage way his knife cut off a "chaw" from the plug of blackjack, something had got crossways of his gizzard.

"Bosun!" he suddenly exclaimed, as his angry eye caught Timmy Chafe. "We're sailin' in the mornin'. Tell the crew to be aboard at five."

"All rate, sir. Anythin' else, sir?"

"No, that's all. But if they ain't all on hand, watch out!"

On which threat he turned to the companion ladder and went below.

"My Glorianna, but somethin's wrong wid the Old Man, sure!" muttered Timmy. "An' his temper ain't gettin' no better, fast. There'll be doin's afore this un ever sights Sandy Hook, or I miss *my* reckonin's!"

The cap'n by all means gave evidence that there would be doings. He looked steeped in venom as he sat down at the cabin table and hit the boards a resounding crack with a fist that had made many a sailor measure the deck planks of no few ships.

"So Mark Ashton thinks he's goin' to get the *Gauntlet* by marryin' that Blanchard gal, does he? By crook! I'll show Mark what kind of a breeze he's hit, s'help me!"

And the cap'n remained brooding at the table, as well he might. For the danger now confronting him of losing control of the barkentine was only too real. A life of hardship and savings had gone into the purchase of a one-third interest in her. Ashton owned another third; and a third had been left to Marian Blanchard by her father's will, only a month before.

Only a month, but already Ashton had changed his mind about selling his share to the cap'n—a bargain that had been all but struck. Already the girl and Ashton, long sweethearts, had decided that the quicker they were married the better. Between them they would own two-thirds of the barkentine. That meant walking papers for the Old Man. It meant Ashton in command, and the jettisoning of all Cap'n Bowring's best laid plans.

"Damn him!" growled the cap'n. "Damn 'em both! If Mark didn't have a master's papers, there'd be time enough to claw off this here lee shore I'm on. But

he *has* got 'em. An' if somethin' ain't done doggone quick, I reckon this'll be my last v'yage as cap'n, aboard o' this un. I got to strand that there marriage knot, or bust!"

Yes, but how?

Cap'n Bowring pondered Mark Ashton's qualifications as a fighter. The younger man, he knew, outclassed him with wits and fist. On land, Bowring was beaten. But if he had Mark at sea? Well, what mightn't happen? Argument might do much, compulsion more; and on a pinch, men *had* been known to fall overboard in the night.

Bowring got up and began to pace the cabin floor.

"By the Law Clink!" he finally exclaimed. "I got it! If I don't show 'em both a thing or two, I never climbed a ratline or cussed a duffer!"

SLOWLY, as if emerging from a mist, Mark Ashton won back to partial consciousness. He got one eye half-open, then the other; felt a long swoop and lurch; heard something that swashed and murmured.

As he thrust out a questing hand, it caught the sideboard of a bunk. A briny smell reached his nostrils. Overhead, heavy boots thudded.

Then realization dawned. With a curse he struggled out of his berth and lunged against a bulkhead.

"Shanghaied!" he gulped, and swayed there weak and dizzy. "Shanghaied by that son of a dog, Bowring!"

He remembered, dimly as through shrouding vapors, something of last night's events—how he had met a former shipmate of his, "Sandy" Peterson, and how Sandy had bidden him into a little waterside restaurant at the rear of Jackman's Wharf, for a bite and sup. Sandy had had a "scrip," which is Newfoundland's name for a doctor's prescription for *spiritus frumenti*. A dry island, is Newfoundland; but numerous are the sick who need scrips.

Though very far from a drinking man, Mark had agreed that a nip to keep out the fog would do no harm. But the nip had made a very extraordinary fog settle about him; and another had brought oblivion. And then—this!

His brain cleared as full realizations brightened. Yes, he was at sea, right enough; and for the next week he had intended to be very busy on land, he and Marian. For in five days the marriage was to have taken place. And now what?

"She'll think I've quit, cold!" Ashton choked, with sick heart and brain. "Run away and left her! By God, but I'm going to see about *this!*"

He lunged to the door and with dazed savagery jerked at it. The door resisted. Locked!

Ashton recoiled, leaped, heaved his massive shoulder. The door, burst from its hinges, crashed into the main cabin and fell upon the table. Ashton hurled himself through the wreckage, bloodshot eyes blazing, fists ready for business.

"Hello, here, what the hell?" he roared.

No answer. The cabin was empty. In a bound he reached the companion ladder and scrambled on deck. The first figure he saw was Cap'n Lemuel Bowring, forward, near the fife rail.

"You dirty whiskered skungeon bucket!" bellowed Ashton, his still uncertain eyes sweeping in a wide prospect of tumbled sea with never any glimpse of land. The fresh air dizzied and confused him; and now he realized his head was splitting. Unsteadily he lurched toward the cap'n. Tousled, unshaven, in wrinkled clothes and with knotted fists, he looked an ugly customer indeed.

The cap'n, though, gave him scant heed. He had been well prepared for something of the sort and had already discounted it. Coldly eyeing Ashton, he set hands on hips and sneered, 'So then, slept off y'r booze, eh? 'Bout time, I'm thinkin'. Turn to, now, an' get to work!"

"Work? *Work?* I'll work you! What the devil d'you mean by shanghaing me?"

"You're crazy, you poor fool!"

"And locking me in? Come on, say something!"

"See here, sonny, you better pipe down a bit," the Old Man returned with mordant scorn. "You ain't been shanghaied, whatever. An' as for lockin' you in, I done that to keep you from jumpin' overboard in a fit o' the horrors. You come aboard last night, full to the scuppers, an' asked fer a berth. I give it to ye, as mate, 'cause ye're a good hand drunk or sober. That's all there's to it, so you better lay off now

an' go on watch. What d'ye think this is, anyhow? A hotel?"

"You're a damn liar!" vociferated Ashton, while on the fo'c'stle head a number of the crew looked and listened with the keenest of delight. "I never came here o' my own free will, and I haven't signed on, and——"

"No, but you will!"

"Will, eh? Why, you dirty scruff, you dog's whelp, for two pins I'd knock your skull to jelly!"

"Lay off, now!" commanded the cap'n, on a rising note. "I ain't takin' no chin from you nor nobody. I'm ridin' this one, see? An' you'll take whatever's comin' to you! Hear me?"

Old Bowring's eyes were blazing now as furiously as Ashton's. With this man aboard the *Gauntlet*, safe at sea, and with ocean law to back him, the cap'n had lost all fear. He felt the game was all in his own hands. But more savagely than ever Ashton fronted him.

"You'll land me as quick as the Lord'll let you, or by the lovely seadogs you'll see no New York!"

"Oh, is that so? Not at all, sonny. I ain't puttin' back to no land fer no booze-fighter the like o' *you!* You come aboard lookin' fer a job, an' now you'll bide here. Turn to, now, an' wear off y'r rum, afore I make ye!"

In sheer rage, Ashton laughed.

"I'll get out o' this one, spite o' you and all that's on her! Work, is it? It'll take more'n you to make me do a hand's turn, even if she goes on her beam ends. I hope to hell you drown, and I hear the water gurgling down your throat! My name's on no articles, and I'm part owner. Work! I'd like to see you make me!"

The young man and the old stood snarling at each other like two wolves. Sea wolves they were, indeed. Had it come to blows, Ashton could have killed the cap'n in short order; for though Bowring had been a redoubtable bucko in his day, now fifty-odd years weighed on him heavily, and Ashton was well under thirty. But the first blow struck by Ashton would have brought the second mate, bosun and, on a pinch, the foremast hands to the cap'n's rescue. Stringent are the laws of the sea. Through all his fury, Ashton remembered it.

"Lucky for you, old man, you're not on land, this minute, with me!" he flung. "It's the ship that's saving your lousy hide, not your own fists. You won't get the beating that's coming to you—not yet. But work? Go on, make me work if you can!"

Bowring contented himself with an oath, itself a sign of hedging. He knew how far to drive this victim of his greed and malice. Though he might have ordered the crew to put Ashton in irons for the balance of the voyage, he did no more than say, "All right. If you're takin' advantage of ownin' a third share, do as ye like. But no land you'll see, this side o' Cape Cod. After you're cooled down a bit an' got the rum out o' you, I reckon you'll turn to, right enough!"

"Go to the devil as fast as full sheet'll drive you!" snarled Ashton.

At this the Old Man only laughed, turned on his heel and walked aft, leaving Ashton alone on deck, the cynosure of every disappointed eye. Right eagerly had all hands hoped for a battle royal. For even though Ashton must have lost it, at all events the cap'n would for a time have got a glorious beating. The loss of all this possible excitement and strong action sorely grieved the crew.

Action enough, however, they were soon to have. Far more than they had counted on.

THE shanghaied man blinked around, with eyes still aching in a blurry daze. A hatred such as he had never thought possible boiled in his heart. One moment the temptation assailed him to rush after Cap'n Lemuel, smite him hip and thigh, and collect out of the Old Man's hide the debt that Bowring owed him.

But through all his hot confusion better judgments prevailed. What possible good might come of beating up the cap'n? None at all; and much harm was inevitable. Assault and battery would never land Ashton ashore. It would only fling him in irons, set the law against him, perhaps even convince Marian—now deserted and wondering—that he was after all only a drunken brawler. Yes, smashing the cap'n might make him lose the girl for good and all.

"Just what the old son of a dog wants!" realized Ashton. "Well, I'm not going to play into his hand. But go to New York? Not if I know it!"

He peered away to starboard. A far, faint wraith of most tenuous blue betrayed the last fading glimpse of Newfoundland. The *Gauntlet* had every stitch set and was lolloping along at a good clip before a strong easterly wind, making her manners to a brisk sea. Ashton's mind cleared a bit; he wondered what time it might be.

But his watch, he found, had stopped. As the second officer came in sight, Ashton queried, "What time is it, there?"

"Nigh hand to eight bells in the first aft'noon watch, sir."

"What? You mean to say we're out that long? Then that's Cape Race bearing away on the starb'rd quarter?"

"Right, sir."

"Good Lord!"

With yearning, angry eyes he gazed at that far, fading line. Though the barkentine was making no more than seven and a half, to Ashton it seemed she was doing sixty. And every moment was carrying him farther from Marian, lessening his chances of return.

A figure of despair and rage he stood watching till even the last smudge of land faded into formless vapors on the world's rim. Watching, he pondered; and at the end he laughed, a laugh that presaged little good for Cap'n Lemuel.

It was three bells in the second dog watch when Ashton finished his supper. Diplomatically the Old Man waited till Ashton had gone on deck before he ate his own. The cap'n by all means wanted to avoid another clash. A day or two at sea, he figured, would quiet the young man. Ship routine would get its grip of him. All would yet be well. If not—well, there were ways to give Ashton a sea-toss, in the darkness, and nobody the wiser.

The Old Man knew in his secret heart he would not balk even at downright murder, to gain his way. If it must come to that, so be it!

And the victim of all this planning, what of his thoughts?

Once on deck, Ashton lighted a pipe that luck had left in his clothes, together with half a tin of tobacco, and tried to get his mind working along logical lines. His headache had vanished, now, swept away, with all his mental cobwebs, by the fresh, free air of old Atlantic. He was able to formulate his problem clearly, and to weave plans for its accomplishment.

That problem was none other than the terrific one of escaping from a vessel on the high seas, and making land. What a fight that would mean! A fight, first with all hands aboard the barkentine; and afterward, a fight with the even less merciful sea. The thought staggered him, but hardened his purpose.

"It means a hell of a fight, sure enough!" thought Ashton. "But I should worry about that. I've been more or less fighting all my life, ever since my father died without leaving me enough to baptize a fairy. Fighting for an education, for a place in the fo'c'stle, a job on the quarter deck; for a chance to change that girl's name; and now for my liberty. If a thing isn't worth fighting for, it's not worth having. I'll fight for this, now. Fight like the old blue devil! By the Law Harry, before I'll let old Bowring meat me out, I'll undertake to cross the Western Ocean in a punt!"

His determination taken, he now began to lay plans for getting free from what is usually a stronger prison than any built of granite and steel—a well-manned ship at sea. The *Gauntlet* carried the usual complement of lifeboats; and Ashton picked on a dory at the stern as best fitting his purpose. It carried a small mast and spritsail, and was of a type that hard experience aboard Newfoundland bankers had rendered familiar.

Once he could get her provisioned and lowered away, he felt he would take chances. But—and a very big "but" that was!—how was he going to manage that? While he was carrying out his plan, what would Cap'n Lemuel and the crew be doing? And how about getting the barkentine hove up till he made his getaway? And after that, how was he to prevent their overhauling him, running him down and snatching him back aboard?

Grave problems, these! The more Ashton pondered them, the greater their difficulty appeared. But not for that did he hoist any white flag of surrender. Cost what it might, even to life's own self, he knew that he would fight!

EARLY next day, Cap'n Lemuel tried to turn-to the rebel.

"You better sign on, Ashton," said he. "Might's well pick up a few dollars on this here v'yage, long's you're goin', anyhow."

"Who told you I was going, you fly-bitten old son of a sea-cook? Must be the same bird as told you I came on here and asked for a job. You shanghaied me, to save this command for yourself, and well I know it! So lay off, now, while you've still got a whole skin over your old bones!"

"Kind of a smart talker, ain't you?"

the cap'n retorted. "Well, you won't be so danged smart, time I'm through-up with you! It you won't work, you ain't goin' to eat. No slindgers gets a bite o' grub, aboard this un!"

"I don't eat, eh? And me a one-third owner! Say, tell that to the horse marines! That's just one more wallop I'm going to hand you, if ever I get you on dry land. There's a licking due you, old boy, you'll never forget if you live to be a thousand!"

Cap'n Lemuel flushed darkly under his sea-tanned, mahogany skin, as he retorted, "I reckon you don't know what it means to threaten a cap'n on the high seas?"

"And I reckon you don't know what it means to shanghai a man, these days. But you *will* know, before I'm done. And what's more, you'll find out what it means to shanghai the wrong man!"

"I can log you as a mutineer, an'——"

"Try it! How long since a man as isn't signed on a ship's articles can commit mutiny? He can commit assault and battery, and murder, too, but he can't commit mutiny. So put *that* in your pipe and smoke it!"

Vastly taken aback by this bit of information, Cap'n Lemuel could only blink and stammer, "That's a lie, like most o' what you say."

"Shows how much sea law *you* know!" Ashton returned.

"Huh! Sea lawyer, eh?"

"You'll think so, and then some, when I get you in a marine court!"

Outpointed, the cap'n snarled a threat that Ashton did not even bother to notice. And Ashton's laugh was gall and wormwood to his soul.

"By God, if he don't turn-to, tomorrow, I'll put him in irons anyhow, an' chance it!" the old bucko decided. "That'd mean a devil of a fight! And in a fight ain't there allus a chance fer a man to get knocked overboard? And when a man's in irons, ain't there allus things might happen to him?"

He had a confused mental picture of Ashton attacking him with manacles, and of himself shooting the captive down; and better still, of any court justifying him.

"I don't give a damn *what* happens, or what tricks he plays," the Old Man decided, "I hold all the trumps, anyhow. All the trumps, every one!"

NIGHT fell, and the wind died till only a capful ruffled the long-heaving Atlantic swells.

"All signals set, now, for me to make a break," Ashton realized. "I might wait a month of Sundays and not get a chance like this. Here's where I hit for the ship!"

He thrilled at thought of the undertaking, bolder than any in fiction—a plan no less than all alone and single-handed to seize a barkentine, overmaster officers and crew, and get away scot-free.

At about two bells of the first night watch Cap'n Lemuel went below and entered his little room, off the main cabin. It was his invariable rule to write his log at this hour; a fact that Ashton, from having sailed with him before, well knew. No compass card had ever received such watchful scrutiny, the past few hours, as Ashton had been giving the Old Man.

Making certain that the coast was clear, below, he pocketed a few fathoms of spun yarn and followed the cap'n. Very quietly he shut the door at the foot of the companion ladder, slid the bolt, made his way to the Old Man's room, and knocked.

"Hello! Who's there?"

"Me, sir. Timmy Chafe, sir," Ashton replied, imitating the bosun's voice.

"Come in, Chafe!"

Ashton entered. He was prepared for a rush and a knockout, in case the Old Man turned from his log; but Cap'n Lemuel did not turn. Engrossed in his writing, painful work for him, he sat there bent over his log, scratching away with a rusty pen, and moving his bearded lips as he laboriously spelled out the words. The light of the brass lamp in gimbals, slowly swaying, cast raw shadows on that hard, brutalized old face, sea bitten and fearless.

The cap's preoccupation favored Ashton. Not too hurriedly he approached and stood directly behind the Old Man's chair. Then he bent and with lightning swiftness flung his right arm about Lemuel's neck. He wrenched the cap'n's head half-round, constricting his muscles till the backbone almost snapped, and most effectually stifling any outcry.

"For two cents I'd twist your head off, damn you!" he growled. "Keep still now, or I *will!*"

The cap'n was a strong man, as men go; but years were against him, and all the advantage of surprise and of attack lay with Ashton. Bowring tried a moment to struggle, but unable to draw a single gasp of breath found his forces almost im-

mediately deserting him. Ashton merely held on, tightening, ever tightening his grip.

The cap'n turned blue, then purple in the face. The veins stood out like tangled snakes upon his temples. His mouth gaped, his lips grew almost black. Terribly staring, his eyes grew glassy; and with a final convulsive heave, he went limp. The blackness of unconsciousness received him.

As Ashton felt Lemuel collapse, he loosed his grip, lifted the unconscious bucko and flung him into the bunk. With his spun yarn he stoutly lashed him, hand and foot, and also gagged him.

"There now, I reckon you'll do for a while!" gibed Ashton. "Going to put me in irons, eh? I see you doing it!"

With Lemuel disposed of, Ashton hunted for the cap'n's revolver, and almost immediately found it in the table drawer. He made sure it was fully loaded, then slipped it into his pocket and was about to slam the drawer shut when his eye fell on a creased and dirty sheet of paper with a few lines scrawled thereon.

"If that's not Sandy Peterson's writing, I miss *my* guess!" thought Ashton. He knew that writing well, by reason of Peterson having already sent him two or three letters at different times, asking for the loan of a few dollars or for a berth aboard the *Fleetwing,* a little fishing schooner Ashton had once gone mate on, at the Banks. Only Peterson ever made quite such big, round periods, and crossed his "t's" with quite such laborious strength.

Ashton caught up the sheet of paper, and with hardening eyes read:

dear captin bowring. this is to let you no i got yours o. k. and will fix him like you want. thogh the job is worth more, as hes a scrapper. but i can putt it over all rite. if ashton aint on bord as wanted im a liar. and dont worry mums the word.

yurs truly, S.

For a moment Ashton stared at this; then with a laugh thrust it into the breast pocket of his flannel shirt and buttoned it carefully in.

"The damn fool, to leave *that* lying around!" he exclaimed. "Never thought I'd be going through his things, eh? This'll go strong in court. If it don't send Bowring up for a spell—and Sandy, too—I'm a farmer!"

Elated by this bit of evidence, he left the captain's private quarters and went out into the main cabin. Here he listened a moment, to make sure no alarm had been given; then, mounting on deck in a casual manner, he saw the mate standing in the moonlight by the weather rail, smoking a peaceful pipe.

"Mate, the cap'n wants you, below," said Ashton quietly.

"All right, sir," the next victim unsuspectingly answered.

As the mate knocked out his pipe on the rail, Ashton picked up a coil of signal halyard hanging in the companionway. He preceded the mate below; and once he got him in the cabin, leaped upon him like a tiger.

A good, two-fisted man was the mate, and for a moment they had it all ways; but Ashton was the stronger. He tripped and downed the mate, shoved the gun into his face and commanded quiet, then triced him up and left him bound and gagged, lying on the cabin floor.

"Sorry I've got to do this," said he, "but there's no other way out of it. Blame the Old Man, not me. He had me shanghaied, and I'm leaving. So good-by!"

Up on deck again, Ashton surveyed the prospect with a critical eye. So far everything had gone as if on rollers; but who could tell when the break might come?

"I've fixed two of 'em, anyhow," thought Ashton. "Now we'll see about number three."

Who was number three to be? Which one of the trio now on deck? This trio consisted of the man at the wheel, the bosun leaning over the poop rail, apparently lost in thought, and the lookout forward. Everybody else, off duy, was below.

A wonderful night, this was. Even through all the turmoil of his passion for liberty, Ashton realized he had never seen a calmer, finer hour at sea. The barkentine, her side lights gleaming, rolled gently on her course, with muffled creaks from spars and cordage. Along her hull the breathing waters hardly murmured. Why, a canoe could have lived on the Atlantic, a night like this!

Unconcernedly Ashton went forward, passing the bosun on his way. Neither spoke. He stopped near the fo'c'stle.

From below, rough voices were roaring out an old sealing chanty.

Ahl ye that love old Newf'n'land,
An' her sons that plough the sea,
Mid summer suns an' winters' snow
So bold an' fearlessly,
Please pay attention fer a while,
An' I will sing to you
A song about the *Greenland,*
An' her hardy sealin' crew!

The slaughter when we struck the seals
'Tis awful to describe.
From east to west, an' miles about,
The ice was crimson dyed.
Sharp knives an' bats did deadly work,
An' when the day was done,
Twice seven t'ousand sculps was flagged,
Beneat' the settin' sun!

"Sing away!" thought Ashton. "The louder the better!"

Quietly he closed the fo'c'stle doors, drew the companion hatch over and secured it with a steel bar.

A moment later he was on the "barricade." Here the lookout proved an easy victim. A flash of the gun, and the command, "Keep your mouth shut and you'll live! Make a noise and you're a dead man!" effectually silenced the A. B.

"Divil a word *I'll* say, sir!" he gulped, perhaps the worst scared seaman between Cape Race and Sandy Hook, that night.

"Mind now, keep quiet, whatever happens!" growled Ashton; and with a dig of the gun into the sailor's rib turned and went aft again.

"Bosun," said he, letting moonlight glitter on the pistol, "I'm leaving this one tonight, if I have to shoot every son of a one on board. Hear me?"

"Yes, sir," answered Timmy Chafe coolly enough, moving hardly a muscle.

"All right then, look alive! Let go the lee braces and check the yards in."

"Not on your life, sir! This here's a wonnerful bad business ye're up to. I ain't takin' no instructions like that. You ain't goin' to take no dory, not while *I'm* on deck! If the cap'n says so, all rate. But if he don't ——"

"You and the cap'n have nothing to say about it, this time! Get aft, now, or I'll blow a hole through you!"

"Aft, is it?" the bosun sparred for time. "But ye told me to let go the braces, sir."

"I've changed my mind. Get aft. I'm not trusting you, Timmy, and I don't want to kill you if I can help it."

"This here's high seas mutiny, sir, an'——"

"Stow that! I'm not asking your opinion of the law. Get aft, or, by God, I'll pump you full of lead!"

The gun now level with Timmy's diaphragm, moved him to depart; but only at a slow crawl. Ashton administered a powerful kick that worked wonders as an accelerator.

"Think I'm fooling, do you?" he snarled. "Pull away! I'm not staying here all night for you to move!"

A few steps brought them near the helmsman.

"Put the wheel hard down!" Ashton commanded. "Then becket it!"

The seaman looked from the bosun to Ashton, and back again.

"Hear me?" vociferated Ashton, covering him. "I won't tell you again!"

"Don't shoot, sir; I'm a married man," said the steersman, and quickly threw the becket on.

"All right. Now then, pick up that coil of rope there, and tie up the bosun. Look alive! Make a good job of it, or you'll be sorry!"

Rebellion seethed, but the pistol enforced orders. Willy-nilly, the sailor had to obey. In a few minutes Timmy was stowed and helpless, lying near the companionway. Keeping the sailor covered, Ashton felt of the hitches on the bosun's wrists and ankles to make certain they were taut and good.

"Now then," he ordered, "get forrard and let go the lee braces!"

As the man hesitated, Ashton stepped close. His unshaven face was hard in the moonlight, and in his eye gleamed that which meant business.

"Jackson, you're a single man, and won't be missed!"

The sailor obeyed with no further delay. Then Ashton forced him to haul in the slack of the weather braces. After the barkentine was hove to in the wind, with

the headsails aback, Ashton and his unwilling confederate went aft again.

On the way, Ashton opened the galley, and forced the sailor to rout out hard bread, pork and onions. These were put

into the dory, together with a breaker of water from one of the lifeboats.

"Now, my man, you're to help me hook on this dory and lower it. I hope to God, for your sake, nothing happens. Take the stern falls. It's life or death for you, so look alive!"

The minutes that followed were the most anxious that ever Jackson had lived through. He gulped with relief when the dory was safe in the water and trailing by her painter in wimples of silver moonlight.

"You there, lookout! Come aft!" Ashton sharply commanded. The man obeyed. Ashton made the steersman tie him up, too. Just as this job was done, a smothered tumult broke out in the fo'c'stle. The crew had discovered they had been barred in.

"Howl away, you sea wolves!" Ashton mocked. "Small good it'll do you. It'll be a proper while before you're out o' *that!*"

Danger existed, however, that they might break their way clear, and Ashton hurried his departure.

"Put your hands out here!" he commanded Jackson.

For a moment it looked as if Jackson were going to fight; but the ever-present gun made him think better of it. Ashton tied him up, hand and foot. Then he drew his knife and cut the wheel-ropes; after which he also cut the lee braces and sheets.

"My God, sir!" ejaculated Chafe. "You're disablin' this un, like that?"

"I am so! The Old Man would have disabled *me,* if he'd dared. Well, turn about's fair play!"

"But if it comes on to blow, sir!"

"You'll get no breeze before morning, and by that time you'll all be free and everything spliced. I've got to get a few hours' head lead on you, somehow!"

"But how us goin' to work free?" demanded the bosun. "You got us lashed up that wonnerful tight!"

"Not so tight but what one of you can get foul of some piece of iron or other, and fray off your lashings on it. It'll take a long time, but that's what I want. Don't blame me. Blame that bucko cap'n of yours."

"This here ain't right, sir! Not by a damn sight!"

"Sorry, but it can't be helped. Well now, I'm off! And good luck to all of you except the Old Man. The devil's black curse on *him!*"

With no further parley, Ashton climbed the rail, slid down the painter and landed safely in the dory. All this time the tumult in the fo'c'sle kept increasing. At sound of it, he laughed.

"Serve you right for shipping with a son of a one like Bowring!" he growled as he cut the painter and rowed into the moon-sparkling wake. "Well now, I'm off. Here goes!"

Coolly enough he set about his work of making a drive for the Newfoundland coast. Only a few hours before, he had taken care to note the *Gauntlet's* position as about 43° 31′ N., 54° 45′ W., and to spot it on a chart. The distance to Burin, on the west coast of Placentia Bay—his nearest reach to Newfoundland—was just a trifle over 250 miles; the course, almost due north.

"Three days' run, if I have good luck," thought Ashton. "Give me a fair breeze and no fog or storm, and I'll make it. And if I don't, I'll die fighting, anyhow—not slugged to death of maybe shanghaied off to the other side o' the world by some plug-uglies in old Bowring's dirty pay!"

The situation now confronting him caused him no great uneasiness. With mast and sail, provisions, water, tobacco and matches, also a pocket compass he had by no means forgotten to pilfer from the bosun's stores, his case was none too bad. Far better indeed than once, eleven years ago, when he had gone adrift in the fog from the banker *Lady Jane,* and had rowed nearly 175 miles to Lance Point on St. Mary's Bay. *That* had been an inferno beside which this adventure now bade fair to rank as little more than a holiday. How little he guessed what impended!

Calmly he stepped the mast and spread his sail to the light breeze. The dory moved off prettily. He shipped an oar in the sculling notch at the stern and settled down in the stern sheets. No need yet for the compass. The polar star stood high before him. He swung the dory's nose directly toward it, and held a course for the home island and for the girl awaiting there.

Gradually the *Gauntlet* diminished, paled in the moonlight, faded in the tenuous vapors of night. From aboard her drifted diminishing sounds of voices that cursed with exceeding bitterness.

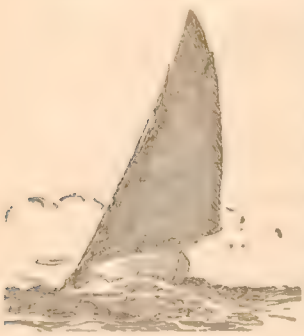
"Go to it, if it does you any good!" Ashton exclaimed. "The more you cuss, the less breath you'll have for getting free and splicing the wheel ropes." Well he knew he had an hour or more lead on the barkentine. That the Old Man would pursue him was certain. Never could Bowring

afford to let Ashton get back to Newfoundland with the story of his shanghaiing. "And if he ever catches me," Ashton realized, "it's good-by. One way or another he'll do my business, entire, before we ever make port. My life won't be worth a Chinese cockroach!"

Knowledge that his very existence depended now on getting clear, added a tang to his exultation.

A quarter-hour's sailing had dropped the barkentine almost out of sight across the slow heaving swells. All sounds from her had now died away. Only a vast, encircling silence ringed the dory, broken by nothing but the whisper of brine along her sharply overhanging sides.

"She's a good sailer," judged Ashton.



"She's doing all of three in this light breeze." Admiringly he regarded the swell of the canvas, white in the moonlight. "Give me a real capful o' wind, and I'll make her step pretty cozy. If the weather holds, there's nothing to it!"

He lighted his pipe, found an easy position, and settled to the long task of holding her head into the north. Smoking, he thought of Marian; he fell to humming a bit of song. His spirits rose. Three days to Fortune Bay. Less, perhaps. A couple of days from there, by the first coasting vessel, to St. John's; he'd be home in less than a week. The letter he had in his breast pocket would clear him, with Marian. The wedding might not be much delayed, after all. His song grew cheerier. And the revenge he'd take on Sandy and on Cap'n Lemuel! How sweet would be revenge!

Two hours passed, and the moon dropped westering. It made old Atlantic, nurse and devourer of Newfoundland's finest manhood, a moving magicry of light. Drowsiness crept upon Ashton. With it came a certain chilliness. Even in the most balmy of August nights, the Banks breed air that reaches for the bones. Three days of this, Ashton realized, might not be such a picnic after all.

"But it can't last three days," he reassured himself. "With any kind of luck at all, I'll sight something in the morning. There's bound to be a few bankers out, round here. Some codder from home, or from St. Pierre, will pick me up."

He lighted his pipe again, and turned this idea in mind. Did he want to be picked up? Not over much. Once aboard a banker, he might have to stay out for a month. No; given decent weather, he preferred to fight through to land on his own. What a story that would make, eh? Already Ashton foresaw himself telling it, with certain embroideries, to Marian. Holding up a barkentine's entire company, making his getaway single-handed and reaching land without help. Here was an epic of the sea such as few had ever lived through! Hard headed though he was, a bit of pride crept in. Who, among humans, hates to prove himself a hero?

Gradually, what with the hypnotic shimmer of the small-running seas, the cramp of his position, and the reaction from the stress of battle, unconquerable sleepiness assailed him. He snatched bits of nap, awoke with a start only to find himself sliding away once more into oblivion. And as night waned, the chill crept ever nigher his marrows. He was shivering a little now, realizing that in the excitement of escape he had overlooked one very essential detail.

"Forgot to take oilers and sou'wester!" said he. "What a fooley I was not to think o' that!" Oilskins now would have warmed him, kept out the penetrant damp. "Ah well, I'll do without 'em. A fellow can't think of everything!"

Another hour, still without signs of pursuit, and sleep threatened to engulf him. That would have been fatal. He would drift far off his course; and besides, the *Gauntlet* might overtake and run him down. Nothing easier than for old Bowring to do that, and claim it was an accident!

No, at all hazards, he positively must not sleep.

He remembered a rough old trick of seamen, to keep awake; a trick sometimes played on sleepy youngsters. Chewing up a little tobacco, he rubbed some juice into his eyes. The smart of it soon had him wide awake enough.

"No sleep for me!" he growled. "If I've got to fight that, too, by God, I'll fight!"

DAWN found him chilled and haggard, but still steering northward, now by compass. Far ahead the world was gray with shrouding fogs

smeared across the vaguest of horizons; but off to the eastward all lay clear. A furnace of gold blazed at the ocean's edge; and suddenly a vivid point of dazzle stabbed. It broadened to an arc. Up surged the sun as if pushed into the world's scenery by a titanic property man

From sun to dory stretched a broad golden path, that weltered into blinding light on every crest. Ashton felt cheered, warmed. He breakfasted on half a hardtack, a slice of cold salt pork and two swallows of water, then lighted his pipe and with renewed force held the dory on her way.

Now and again he peered abroad over the mighty waters as the sun strengthened. Not a sail! Alone in that immensity, the dory with its tiny rag of canvas seemed a sheer impertinence. But Ashton smiled and nodded with satisfaction.

"I've shaken the Old Man, sure thing!" he exulted. "He figured I'd make a run northeast by north, for Cape Race. Well, here's where I put a reef in *his* plans, all righto!"

This mood of exultation lasted hardly a quarter-hour. For presently, scanning the horizon to southward, Ashton descried the tiniest speck of a sail; and as he watched, this mounted. Here now was something to fear! Yet after all, might it not belong to any one of a hundred vessels other than the *Gauntlet?*

Another quarter-hour, and Ashton knew it did not. Against the bright horizon only too clearly he recognized the cut of those square sails. Far aloft, there, he well knew a lookout was stationed with a powerful glass. Slight chance existed that this lookout had missed him. Already, in every probability, Bowring knew just where Ashton was. The fact that the barkentine was making a straight "dod" for him lent weight to this assumption. Right bitterly the fugitive cursed Bowring and all his ways; right anxiously he stood up and peered ahead at the far fog-banks that, alone, now offered any refuge.

Ashton understood how slight his chances were of ever reaching the fog before the *Gauntlet* should overhaul him. Even in that light breeze, the barkentine could, with a full canvas spread, do six or seven. The dory, close to the water, could hardly crawl three. This, and the fact that the fog was probably drifting northward, lent every advantage to the pursuer. By mid-morning Bowring would be upon him; and that this meant death, who could doubt?

"I'll give 'em a fight for it, anyhow!" growled the fugitive, savagely glad of the revolver in his pocket. That it was fully loaded enheartened him. Yes, if ever he were hauled aboard, he would give a good account of himself. But against the probable choice of merely running him down and crushing the dory, what could he do? A bare nothing. "All I ask is a chance to fight," thought Ashton. "But the damned murderer and coward, he won't even give me that!"

Steadily, as the sun mounted, the vessel bore down on him. That it was indeed the *Gauntlet,* Ashton now very clearly saw. He thought he could almost distinguish a black speck, aloft, that was the lookout posted there by Bowring. Except for the fog, no hope at all was left. Very far to leeward a drift of smoke smudged the horizon. Some liner, this; or perhaps a steam trawler, or a freighter? Little it mattered. That vessel might as well have been in the North Sea, for all the help Ashton could hope for from her.

Now the barkentine was hardly two miles astern, hull and rig clearly defined as the long swell heaved Ashton up, then partly hidden as it dropped him into shallow ocean valleys. She grew visibly nearer. Her vast clouds of canvas made a mock of the dory's tiny pocket handkerchief. A mile and a half; a mile, then closer——

Ashton clenched impotent fists, flung curses that fell on empty air. Well, at all events, everything would soon be over. This torment could not be for long.

EMPTY air! But was the air empty? To the fugitive it seemed as if a tenuous veil was blurring it, dimming the sun-ball. Something had begun to fade from the sharpness of the barkentine's outlines, her rig to melt a little. And the plaques of golden light swimming on every tumble of brine had commenced to show a brassy sheen.

Ashton's heart leaped.

"By the lovely sea dogs!" he cried in a loud voice. "If the fog ain't rolling!"

Rolling down it was, and nothing less. Who can fathom its mysterious ways, predict its ghostly creepings? Out of a clear sky sometimes a Banks fog in a few paltry minutes will wrap up the world in wool. Or, when thick as a blanket, almost while you count a hundred, it will lift and fade to nothing. And now of all times was the

season when this sea traitor furls and unfurls its league long curtains, swallows dories far from their schooners, blots out side lights, breeds collisions, sets the mournful hand horns and ear torturing sirens bellowing.

As Ashton, almost in the very grip of the implacable Cap'n Lemuel, watched with exultant eyes, a gray mist whirled spiralling past him like fine rain. Every thread of his jacket pearled itself with tiny droplets. An impenetrable shroud blotted out sky and sea. Only the sun remained; and that had become no more than a dim, angry blur of swimming copper.

Nothing now existed for the fugitive but his dory and a tiny heave of brine walled and roofed by vapor. In and in from nothing slid the lazy crests, heaving the dory, then with a mocking beckon of white-capped fingers slipping away into nothingness again. Ashton found himself as effectively hidden as if a thousand leagues of ocean rolled between him and the *Gauntlet*.

Hidden, yes; but for how long? When might not the fog shift or clear again? Uncertain as a woman's whim, what sure reliance could he put on it?

None! Yet even this respite was gloriously welcome. And on the instant, Ashton began making the best of it. He eased out his sheet, swung his oar over, and put the dory's head sharp to westward. He figured that old Lemuel would credit him with doing just the opposite; with laying a course more to eastward. Good, then; he would outplay the cap'n's reckoning!

Fortune favored, and the fog bank held. Of the barkentine he saw nothing more. Once he thought he heard a vague rumor of sound far on his port quarter. But whether that sound had really come from the *Gauntlet* or had been but an imagining of his tired brain, Ashton knew not. Nor did he give much heed. All his energies now were centered on using the slight and dying breeze to full advantage, to wringing from it every possible mile to westward.

Thus an hour passed; two and three hours; half a day. The fugitive ate again. Chilled, stiffened, overcome with drowsiness, he still found comfort in his pipe. Not yet did he dare turn north once more. His course now lay parallel to the Newfoundland coast, toward those perilous and ever-changing shoals that circle "The Graveyard of Ships," Sable Island. That it was taking him fair into the steamer lane where record making liners, fog or no fog, shear the Atlantic at top speed, he well understood. But this peril he preferred to any possibility of being overhauled by Cap'n Lemuel.

DAY, a pale ghostliness, faded at last into vague cerements of night; and now it seemed the wind was freshening a little and the sea beginning to build. Cramped, fog-soaked, chilled to the marrows, Ashton altered his course due north again. The chances were, he figured, that he had now got to westward of Dantzic Head, furthest tip of the peninsula enclosing Fortune Bay, and that he might, with luck, hit the Miquelons. Missing these, he might have to try for the formidable cliffs and battlements in the region of Cape La Hune. No matter, just so that he made land!

By midnight he found himself unable to fight on, without at least an hour's sleep or so. Everything had become a swimming blur. His eyes refused to stay open. He swayed, slumping in the stern sheets like a man in liquor.

"No go!" he decided. "I've got to have a bit of a doss-down, I don't care what happens!"

He flung his oar into the bottom, furled sail, unshipped the mast and rigged a sea anchor with mast and sail. This, made fast at the bow, would keep the dory's head into the steadily increasing sea and prevent her shipping water. Hardly had he got the little craft thus safely "windrode," than he flung himself into the bottom and plunged into oblivion.

From this he was awakened suddenly, how long after he knew not, by an angry and ear-torturing bellow that tore the night to rags.

He scrambled up, haggard and dazed, but realizing that a rushing liner had just flung its demoniac siren whoop into the fog enshrouded dark.

Whereaway she might be, and how bound, he could form no slightest idea. He knew the dory was heaving on a moderately heavy sea; knew by the slosh of unseen waters about his feet that a few rollers must have boarded her. But of the liner he could get no bear-

ings. And he crouched there, tense, straining his ears, a mere ant on a tossing chip in the Atlantic.

Then suddenly a faint murmur drifted to him; an ominous sound that rapidly mounted to a rippling rush. A blur of light leaped out of the black. Swifter than phantoms in a dream, an immense mass flung itself upon him. A tall swiftness ripped the sea, shooting fountains of cold spume. Right above his head a siren screamed, splitting the sky with bellowing echoes.

A vast wall sped past the dory, now flung aloft in a smothering wave. Cyclopean eyes of light blurred in a long line. Came then a smothering rage of foam that overwhelmed ant and chip, alike. Swirling propellers thrashed the sea like giants' egg-beaters.

Overborne, the dory spun round, swooped aloft, poised a dizzy second and plunged over. Drunkenly it weltered, bottom-up.

OBLIVION for a moment swallowed Ashton, and a vast roaring maelstrom gulped him down, down into a formless chaos that stunned and deafened.

Heavily booted and clad, it seemed he must be engulfed never to rise. But an up-surge caught him. Came a whirling spin, aloft. Ashton broke water. Another crest flogged him down. He fought free, struck out. The atom of life, all alone now on that tossing wilderness of ocean, still fought to live.

Vast garlands of foam lay abroad, their whiteness dimly gleaming in the black, as winking specks of phosphorescence shot them through. Against these foam wreaths a blot of steadier darkness betrayed the dory's presence. Toward that the fugitive struck with uncertain lunges.

He reached the blot, presently, grappled it, found it was the dory indeed. The dory, yes; but upside-down and gutted of oars, food, water, everything. Even the sea anchor had been ripped away. Nothing but the bare shell now remained. A sorry craft for voyaging upon those mighty reaches!

For a few minutes Ashton could do no more than cling, and gulp for breath. He was stunned, water-logged, spent of all vital forces. The whole life of him, now, centered in just gripping the bottom-plug that projected some three inches from the planks. For even that frail hand-hold, in this universe of death, thank whatever gods might be!

After resting a few minutes that resembled eternity, the fugitive set himself to righting the dory. With a tremendous effort he got his toes upon the overhang of the gunwale and raised himself half-out of the surges. The dory, which lay in the trough of the sea, canting toward him, lifted her other gunwale clear. Ashton clambered across the bottom, dragged it down, and with a sudden rush rolled the dory right-side-up.

Flung back into the sea, Ashton in a few strokes reached the bow and clung there, resting again. Another effort, and he dragged himself aboard; aboard into a small boat that, though its natural buoyance kept it from sinking, was brimmed with water 'midships, and over which the combers kept steadily breaking.

"No chance, now, to bail her!" Ashton realized. In a calm sea and with a "pudgel" or bailing scoop, the task would not have been too hard. More than once he had done such. But now——!'

Without oars, scoop, food or water, cap gone, matches and tobacco ruined, Ashton lay in the bows of the all but submerged dory. The night wind, streaming in out of dark vastnesses unfathomable, piercingly transfixed him. Hungry foam curled about him as the whitecaps broke aboard and over. Blackness of sky and sea engulfed him. Alone, but for the companionship of death, he awaited—what?

All now was lost, save hope and the spirit of struggle.

"I'm not done yet!" he told himself. "I'll fight!"

THE earliest glimmers of dawn, overcast and cloudy but no longer strangled with fog, found Ashton at work trying to clear the dory of water.

He had taken off both boots, and now with a furious energy that fast consumed his last reserves of strength, was flinging brine outboard with both of them. Sometimes he seemed to gain a little; again a toppling roller in one second undid the work of many minutes. The dory, lying beam-on to the sea, kept shipping water as fast as he could throw it out. Half an hour of this futile toil convinced Ashton it would never come to anything.

"If I could only hold her bows-on," he said at last, "I might get somewhere." Yes, but how?

He stopped work and fell a-thinking. A wretched travesty of himself he looked; unshaven, hollow-cheeked and with inflamed eyes; his hands and feet swollen

and softened by sea water; clothes hanging about him in drenched disorder. But in his glance still shone the spark of an unquenchable spirit. And at the end he almost laughed, as he exclaimed, "By God, I've got it!"

Crouching in the water he managed to get his boots on again. A few vigorous kicks loosened one end of a longitudinal stringer. By using all his strength, he tore the stringer free and broke it in two.

He now found himself in possession of two slightly curving strips unequally long. About two fathoms of his painter still remained at the bow. He cut this off and unstranded it; with some lengths of one strand he lashed his strips together, edge to edge. He now had a grotesque substitute for a paddle.

The paddle served. By dint of heavy labor that taxed him almost to the breaking point, he was able to bring the dory up. He hauled his boots off again, bailed

desperately; then, as the dory fell off again, once more set to paddling. This process he repeated dozens of times.

The sharp edges of the paddle blistered his brine-softened hands till the blood started, but still he toiled on. For this way life beckoned, and life was still worth a battle.

At the end of two hours he had the dory so free of water that she would ride without shipping breakers. Another hour, and she was clear. For all his exhaustion, Ashton felt a fever of exultation. The fight, yes, he was winning it! But hunger was beginning to gnaw, and a most agonizing thirst had set in. Brine-soaked, and having swallowed a great deal of sea water, he felt horribly sick. But through it all his courage burned clear. The girl—yes, he would battle his way to her. Vengeance on Cap'n Lemuel, sometime he would have that, too! Love and hate spurred him on; and which was stronger, who could say? Each by itself can rowel a man to extraordinary deeds. Both joined can make him a superman.

"I've got to get some kind of crazy jury-rig on this one," Ashton reflected. The idea seemed a stark absurdity. A rig? How in the name of all ingenuity could he manage that?

Ingenuity it was, indeed, that answered the question. Working with torn and bleeding hands, with aching muscles, he reduced his right trousers-leg to strips, which he braided into strong cords. Another stringer, ripped from the dory's other side, provided a frail mast and boom. With a length of his braided cord, Ashton attached the boom to the mast. Then he proceeded to fashion his sail.

And such a sail! He lashed one sleeve of his coat at the top of the mast. The sleeve, cut open, he fastened to the mast with bits of his rope yarn; as he also did the buttonhole side of his coat.

He next stripped off his shirt, carefully removing from its pocket the all-important letter of Sandy Peterson. The letter, though sodden, still remained legible. Ashton spread the letter in the bows, to dry, which in due time it did and was thereafter stowed in his trousers pocket. The shirt yielded more sail material. Ashton secured one side of it to the bottom of his coat. He fastened the bottom of the shirt to the mast, and the other side of it to the boom, lashing the left sleeve to the boom's outer end. The rest of his unstranded painter made a passable sheet, which he could make fast with a hitch to a thole pin.

He stepped this nightmare mast and sail, and through all his pain had to laugh at the grotesque result. Surely, never since men had sailed the Seven Seas, had any such been beheld!

Fantastic as the rig appeared, it was hardly more so than the man himself.

A figure out of some phantasmagoria, indeed, he looked. All his garb now consisted of was a vest over his sodden underwear, and trousers that boasted only half of one leg. For other equipment he had only his knife, boat compass and revolver, plus the apology for a paddle.

"But I've got steerageway on this one, anyhow!" he exulted as the moderate breeze fluttered and filled his preposterous sail and as a little ripple at the bow announced that the dory was really under control once more. "If she makes half a knot, she'll be doing well. But half a knot's better'n *no* seaway, by the Lord Harry! And if anything sights me, I couldn't carry better distress signals than that sail!"

He sprawled at the stern, with his rough and inadequate paddle keeping the dory's

nose into the north. As she topped the building swells, his inflamed eyes scanned the watery plain for sail or smoke, but none appeared. A desolation of heaving vacancy, under that sullen-clouded sky, stretched to farthest horizons.

"Bad enough," muttered Ashton with swollen, blackened lips, and shivered as, less than half-clad, he crouched in the Atlantic breeze. His fantastic clothing and the pistol, stuck in the tightened belt of his trousers, made of him a figure like some pirate set adrift. "Bad enough! But I'd a damned sight rather see nothing at all than the *Gauntlet*. I've given Lemuel the go-by, anyhow. And Newfoundland's ahead there, somewhere. And as for fighting, by the Law Clink, fighting to get there, I haven't begun to fight, yet!"

Night found him still slowly lagging northward through that heaving infinitude. Though the wind had freshened a bit and the dory was now doing better than one knot, Ashton's plight had become desperate.

For nearly forty-eight hours he had had neither sup nor bite. A raging fever of thirst tortured him; weakness assailed him; his hands were raw and pulpy, and where they held the improvised paddle, they stuck redly to the wood. Nightmare visions swam in his brain. He fought them off, but ever they surged back, more hideous than before, things that mocked and gibbered, hilarious faces, forms of terror. Once when old Lemuel started out of the thickening gloom, Ashton struck at him and howled, and found he had but dashed his fist against the gunwale, skinning sore knuckles.

That fetched him to his senses enough to unstep the mast and take in his paddle.

"Let her drift, now," thought he. "That's the best I can do." With his frail cordage he dared not try to rig a sea anchor. For, should he lose that grotesque gear, all hope of making any headway would vanish utterly.

Spent, done and delirious, he collapsed in the bottom of the dory; and the long night wore on, enshrouding him in merciful oblivion.

Vague sensations of light once more awoke him to some knowledge of another day. As he struggled up, and swayed at the heaving gunwale, the semblance of a thought pierced his brain.

"I'm gone! I'm seeing things that aren't there. This is the bring-up, now!"

It seemed to him he saw something. But was this only another specter of torment? A specter it appeared; for if that was a ship, how tortured and how strange a one!

The black hulk—it was little more—lay perhaps a mile to leeward. Drunkenly it canted to the seas, its stern aloft, bows buried in the ocean. Its masts looked shattered stumps; and down its stark flanks depended slow-swaying ropes that pendulumed from rail and davits.

A sinister apparition, that! A derelict of derelicts, abandoned, storm-bitten, leaking; a dead ship awaiting burial; a ghost ship haunted by memories of who could tell what horror?

And yet, by contrast with the crazy frailness of the dory, without food, water, equipment, how glad a hope this derelict bore!

For a little time, Ashton's reeling senses failed to concentrate on the hulk as a reality. But as the dory wallowed slowly on, the hulk persisted. All the other visions had faded; this remained.

"She's real!" the castaway finally convinced himself. "The crew quit in a panic, and left her sinking. But she didn't sink. There's food aboard, there! Clothes! Boats, maybe!" And as something like realization dawned on him. "Good God, if I can only get aboard, I'm saved!"

It took him more than half an hour, toiling with his paddle and helped by the scarecrow-flapping sail, to win close under the port side of the derelict. The stimulus of this new excitement had somewhat steadied Ashton's brain, and had whipped up his failing strength to one last effort. He unstepped his mast again, and let the moderately rough sea carry him hard under the stern.

"A rotten old freighter," he judged. "Ought to have been sent to Davy Jones,

twenty years ago!" But never mind; she offered refuge now. No palatial liner could have been more welcome. The derelict's hull, his practised eye—now keen despite his anguish and fever—very well determined to be almost incredibly foul. As the long sweep of stern rose out of the combers, it showed immense festoons of weed, together with ugly leprous patches of barnacles. The propeller, of obsolete pattern, hung ten feet above the waves; and nearly

all its corroded metal was deep-crusted with shells.

Though boat falls were dangling here, into the sea, such a cross-lop of turbulent waves beat in under the "tuck" that Ashton refrained from trying to grasp any of them. He let his dory drift to the lee side, and there in smoother water feebly paddled toward the bow.

Over him the hulk perilously hung, swaying soggily, threatening to roll on its beam ends and crush him down to rise no more. Scarred was that hulk, befouled and patched; but the timbers, once powerful, still held.

"She might last yet for days," said Ashton, mastering his weakness. "Lord, if I can only board her!"

Visions of food in galley and lazarette, of water in tanks and butts, rose tantalizingly. Ashton's mind now looked no further than just getting aboard. That the hulk might at any minute let go her last hold on life, yield up her ghost and plunge to black depths, now meant nothing to him. Food! Water! He would have bartered life itself for those!

Yes, but could he win to them?

There would have been no trick at all to it, in Ashton's ordinary strength. To catch a fall, swarm up it hand over hand? Child's play! But now it was stark impossibility. Bitterly he groaned, cursing his weakness.

"If I can't make it now—it'll be hell!"

Baffled, racked with terror of failing when to fail meant death, he sculled his dory forward.

As the derelict was far down by the head, her rail came slanting sharply toward the waves. 'Midships, that rail was hardly eight feet above water; and a little farther toward the bow, rollers broke over it. As the hulk plunged, the seas ran foaming aft; then with her rise, they tumbled back again in tide-rips of white turmoil.

Suddenly Ashton laughed. He had conceived a plan of getting aboard different from any that ever any castaway had tried. But could he bring it to fruition? Was strength still in him for that undertaking?

"By God, I *will!*" he croaked; and paddling still a little farther toward the bow, waited his chance.

This was not long in coming. Mightily the derelict lunged down, with a Niagara frothing aboard her. On the crest of this wave, urged by Ashton's last forces, rode the dory. In over the rail it whirled, spinning half-around; aft past the forward galley, and fetched up with a splintering crash against a winch just forward of the booby-hatch and the old hand pump.

Smash! The dory swooped over, crushed like an eggshell on a rock. Catapulted out, Ashton was flung against the aft galley. With the breath beaten out of him, just strength enough left to cling to the main hatch as the refluent wave swept him toward the bow, he gripped the coaming and held on for life's sweet sake.

Then as the sea rolled back and down, and the bow lifted till the barricade almost broke water, he scrambled desperately up the wet, slippery and befouled deck planks, on, up their steep incline. He reached the break of the poop, dragged himself up a short ladder and fell hardly conscious between the shattered starboard rail and the engine-room grating.

Below him on the main deck once more he heard the frothing rush of seas boarding the hulk. Foam shot up over the winch, across the poop rail, wetting him. But he knew himself safe from that cold clutch of the sea! Safe for the moment; though how long that safety was to last, who could prophesy?

A sense of swooning weakness overmastered him. Whirling darkness, shot through with lights that flickered, swam before his eyes. Then the lights swiftly faded, and a vast velvet black engulfed him.

ASHTON was aroused from this by a sharp sense of pain in his left hand. Dragging himself up a little, as he lay on that steeply-tilted and ever heaving deck, he shook his hand; he got dim visions to focus on it, and found it bright with tiny droplets of blood. Something had bitten him, bitten deep.

This brought him clear awake in a second. And now he saw a rat, an old gray rat, scruffy and huge and red-eyed, with tail half-gone, and with a smear of crimson on its bristle-whiskered chops.

"You son of a one!" croaked the castaway, and scrambled at the rat; which, however, did not retreat. A very monster of a rat, it was. An old Norway wharf rat, savage with starvation. It stood its ground, chippering at him with rage. And back of it another scuttered past; and under the bridge Ashton now saw three more.

"Good God!" he gulped; and sudden terror got its hold of him. He looked aft, down the runway where he was crouching. Rats, more rats! Two ran up the slant, beside the cabin housing. A glimpse of

the after deck showed him more. Everywhere, rats! As in a sickening revealment he knew the truth, that he had come aboard a derelict long abandoned, where rats had ravaged everything, devoured everything, Where he, seeking food, was now perhaps destined to be no more than food for rats, himself!

This brought him up all standing. With rats a-swarm he must not lie there, barelegged, to be rushed by them, eaten alive by them. A pack of starving rats is formidable. Clad in his grotesquerie of odds and ends, he retreated against the rail that dizzily canted to starboard, and drew his pistol.

"I'll get *you,* anyhow!" he shouted, savagely cursing; and with a crashing report sent a bullet into the old tusker that had bitten him. The rat leaped, squealed, fell on its back and thrashed into convulsions. And on the instant, rats came slinking, skurrying, running, squeaking. Cannibals, maddened with famine.

Even as Ashton looked, they swarmed upon the dying one, and with shrill chatterings, squeals and struggles, ripped the victim to bleeding rags and shreds. The rat in a moment simply vanished beneath that appalling savagery; and where it had been, there now showed only a bloody spot on the foul planks, where filthy rodents battled in the frenzy of their lust for food.

Horrified, Ashton staggered across the runway to the door of the aft galley, that gaped wide, swaying with every roll of the derelict. Shuddering he stumbled into the galley. A big brown rat jumped off the range where it had been licking at what had once been a grease spot on a lid. Two others skittered from a locker opposite the range; and of these one snapped at him as it slid away between his feet. He kicked it, sent it sprawling out into the runway. It turned, ran at him with naked teeth. He stamped it to a pulp that quivered and once more kicked it out; and its companions made swift work of it. Slamming the door, Ashton sank down a-shudder on the locker.

"God, what a floating hell!" he groaned. "It's a fight *now,* till I'm sighted and taken off!"

Yes, but suppose the derelict were not sighted, what then? She seemed to have been long adrift. Might she not long continue? And if not, then Davy Jones was waiting both for her and for her wretched passenger. Meantime, what of food and water? What of this horrible plague of rats?

"I was a fool to leave the dory," thought Ashton. "That would have been a clean death, anyhow, with nothing to pick my bones after I was gone!"

Sunk in starved dejection, red-eyed, gaunt and unshaven, the man crouched listening to the squeak and gibber of the unclean beasts, the pattering slither of their famine-driven quest.

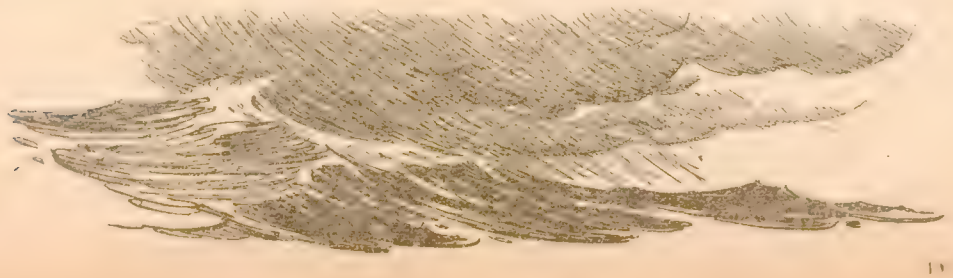
A sound above his head caused him to look up. Through the half-open ventilator of the galley, a gray tail was hanging. Ashton sprang up and with a curse slammed the ventilator shut. A squeal of pain followed; a scuffle that amid confused, shrill squeakings, told where still another rat, disabled through being caught by the tail, was going the way of all flesh in any way injured.

"How about me?" pondered the castaway. "How long before they'll get *me?*"

A prey to hideous fancies, he remained prisoned in the galley; while outside the rodents held high carnival, and while up and down the steep-slanted forward deck the long seas rushed and ebbed and came again with tumbling slathers of foam hungry to gulp the dying derelict.

ASHTON'S mind presently cleared a bit, and his thoughts reverted to the wherewithal for satisfying thirst and famine. His eye fell on a huge brass faucet near the bottom left-hand corner of the range; the tank faucet where the cook drew hot water.

Getting up, Ashton took down an old, battered coffee pot from a hook. He bent and tried the faucet. At first, only a sort of thick red rust oozed out; but presently



something like water began to flow. He caught a quart of this repellant liquid. In Kipling's classic words, "It was crawlin', an' it stunk," but this was no time for finicking. Ashton tossed it off, and knew that since life had begun for him, never had he tasted any drink so miraculously sweet.

"Ah!" he sighed with beatitude, and smeared his lips on a blistered hand. "Now for some grub!"

Easier to say than do! The galley yielded almost nothing. Judging by earth in the locker, he knew potatoes had been kept there, but not even a shred of peeling now remained. The rats had gnawed their way into the locker and had made a clean sweep of every tuber.

Not a crumb of hard bread remained, nor were there any turnips, carrots or onions. Everything had been devoured. The shelves held a few cans with sugar, coffee, tea and spices; and there was a bottle, too, with vinegar. Fine tucker for a starving man!

Tortured by inexorable famine, Ashton chewed up a few coffee beans and some sugar, and swallowed this mess with another swig of the foul water. Beggars cannot be choosers; and Ashton was now a beggar at the doors of destiny, praying for admission to the house of life.

Thinking he had exhausted the possibilities of the galley, he nevertheless made another search of its dirty, blue-painted walls. Immense good fortune rewarded him. Stuck into a little leather strap he found a blackened old stump of a pipe with half a load of the rankest tobacco still in it. And though he now had no matches, he scraped this into his own pipe and thrust his pipe into his brine-sore mouth. Such a find of tobacco, his own being hopelessly ruined by sea water, gave him fresh courage and a new grip on life.

"Not too damned bad, at that," he judged, already a little bucked up by what he had swallowed. "If I can get aft and have a look-round, I may soon be on the fat pig's back." Which is Newfoundland's way of saying "Easy Street."

Arming himself with a cleaver from the galley rack, and with the revolver in his belt, the derelict man commenced to explore this derelict ship to which he had fallen heir.

A derelict he looked indeed, in his amazing apology for clothes. No beachcomber that ever was, presented so villainous an aspect. As he climbed aft, up the steep-sloping runway past the funnel, beside the engine-room scuttle and under the bridge —this being located unusually far toward the stern—he appeared a combination of castaway, mutineer and pirate.

The ship, his trained eye perceived, was an old carvel-built, bark-rigged, three-masted steamer of not above 400 tons, perhaps 170 feet long and 40 beam; a square, chunky vessel of a type long obsolete.

Not one of her masts was standing above the main top; and the mizzen was a mere stump, whence top-hamper trailed over the hull and dangled from the rail to port. Two of the funnel stays were broken; the funnel swayed with every roll of the sodden vessel, dismally creaking. Somewhere below, sounded the persistent slamming of a door. That noise spoke of absolute abandonment, more than any silence could have done.

"She's been left a long time," said Ashton. "Been through a blow or two since, looks like. By the way she's down by the head, looks like she might have hit a berg. Lord, I only hope they left her in a hurry, so they didn't take all the grub!"

He pushed on aft, driving an occasional rat from some nook or corner; passed under the bridge and came to the after deck housing with the cabin skylight on top. The companion door was closed and jammed. A few crashes with the cleaver chopped away the edge, and the door swung free. It admitted Ashton to a narrow passageway that ran from the ladder aft almost to the old-fashioned double wheel; for this ship steered by hand, in the most cumbersome possible manner. The passageway, like all else, was tilted at a dizzy and improbable angle; and as the vessel heaved, footing was difficult. Steadying himself, Ashton entered the passage. He half-recoiled, at sight of a cat's skeleton lying by the top of the ladder.

To judge by the size of those bones, the cat must have been a huge Tom, no doubt a famous ratter. Well, its ratting days had ended with inglorious defeat. Forgotten, left behind by the deserting crew, horrible must have been its fate. Long since the rats had overmastered and devoured it. And now its bones, picked a polished white, lay in mute witness to the savagery of the rodent horde.

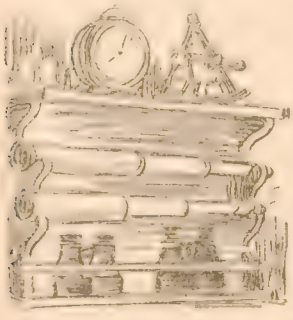
Ashton shuddered, kicked the skeleton aside and went on down the ladder, that now overhung so that he had to cling with all his poor strength.

"Hello, in there!" he hailed loudly, in the gloom of the bottom. "Anybody aboard?"

No answer, not even an echo. Nothing, save the monotonous banging of that door somewhere, or the squeak of a rat unseen.

Ordinarily, Ashton had no nerves. But starvation and exposure had worn him down, badly. Now he was sweating, trembling, as he mustered his forces to explore the cabin. He thrust the door open, and found himself in a dingy, musty place with a dirty oilcloth-covered table, an overturned "bogey" or stove, and various doors opening on both sides as well as at the farther end. Vague light seeped down from cracked bull's-eyes in the housing, and from the skylight, over some shattered glasses of which a ragged tarpaulin had been lashed. The lamp above the table creaked slowly in its gimbals. A silence as of the tomb otherwise gripped this sepulchral place, save for the slamming door that he cursed as he put it on the hook.

Again Ashton shouted, more for the comfort of his own voice than with any hope of answer. Convinced that no one was aboard, he flung open a door. This gave admittance to a room obviously used by some of the engineers. The next room was the Captain's. A stopped chronometer, charts, sextant and telescope in racks, told this plainly enough. So, too, did the ship's log, that had slipped off the table and now lay sprawling on the floor, a mass of crumpled, rat-gnawed leaves.



Ashton was about to leave this desolation, when his staring eye caught sight of another eye that equally stared. Only this eye was not of flesh and blood, but of white bone. A socket hole it was, in a clean picked skull; and with a sort of jocular intentness it seemed regarding him from the berth.

Horrified, Ashton recoiled. The cleaver, released from nerveless fingers, clashed to the floor and slid away down the steep incline.

Almost at once, though, the castaway checked his senseless panic.

"Hell! Only a dead man, that the rats have picked!" he exclaimed. And he advanced again, to examine the unknown victim.

In the outer cabin, a patter and squeak told of rats running, squabbling there. Ashton picked up his cleaver, and gripping an upright at the end of the berth, looked with grim interest at this most macabre spectacle.

Yes, this must indeed have been the captain. Even in that unnerving moment, Ashton wished it had been old Cap'n Lemuel. The rats had made a good job of finishing this mariner. Even the blue clothing was all rent and gnawed, and so were the jack-boots. About the only things left intact were a plain gold ring on one skeleton finger, a silver watch and chain, and an empty square-face that once had held gin.

"I see how it was," pondered the castaway. "He wouldn't quit, with the others. Took to drink, maybe—and the rats got him. Poor devil! Well, I can't help him, now; but I reckon he can help *me!*"

And so the captain could, indeed. Clothes swung from hooks; a warm pea-jacket, oilers, what-not. Yes, here was a god-send of gear. Ashton laughed, crazily, with incongruous notions struggling in his brain that spun.

"He's a picked man, all righto!" he jested, shivering. "Well, here's where I inherit. Lord, if there's only grub and water, too!"

Things were beginning to weave and whirl. Ashton knew he had come close to his limits of endurance. Unless he could find sustenance aboard, how long ere he, too, would be like the captain here?

He returned to the main cabin, located the pantry and with savage eagerness began rummaging it. The fact that he had to dislodge half a dozen rats that snapped and squealed at him, and that showed fight on shelves and in corners, by no means deterred him. Two he killed with his cleaver, and kicked their carcasses out into the cabin, where presently others—appallingly many others—reduced them to bones.

It was dark in the pantry, but though a lamp was swinging there, Ashton had no means of lighting it. With trembling hands exploring the place, he found no matches. He went back to the captain's cabin, searched that, fumbled through all the drawers, dragged everything out of the pockets. He discovered half a tin of tobacco—thank heaven for that!— And a box of safety matches.

But when, trembling with exultation, he tried to strike these, not one would light.

Wet! They had been wet! In some storm or other, perhaps when the vessel had struck the berg or taken her fatal blow,

the captain had been drenched, and the matches had all been ruined. Cursing, Ashton flung the box down and staggered back to the pantry.

Food! He must have food soon, now, or madness indeed would be upon him.

The pantry, for all his groping, yielded nothing but three cans of condensed milk, and two broken, mouldy and weevil-infested biscuit in the bottom of a tin box. Confident that he would find more in the lazarette, Ashton greedily devoured the biscuit, weevils and all. With his cleaver he hacked open a can of the condensed milk and let it dribble into his mouth; he scraped the can with his finger, licking this like a very savage. A savage, in fact, he had become. "Only nine meals lie between civilization and anarchy." So some philosopher has said. Now Ashton was by way of proving it.

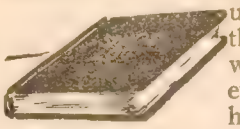
Kicking a rat or two out of his way, he returned to the captain's cabin and put on the dead man's best jacket and trousers, also a dry pair of socks and boots. It was hard work, dressing with the cabin at such a slant. He had to balance himself on the edge of the sofa locker opposite the berth; and constantly the eyeless sockets regarded him with sardonic amusement. The roll of the derelict made the skeleton sway a bit, so that the skull seemed slowly nodding, as if to say:

"Well now, mate, enjoy yourself while you can. Take my things and welcome. 'Twon't be for long—and then you'll be a picked man, too!"

Strengthened by even the poor grub, Ashton now gave little heed to the skeleton or the rats, either. He turned to the captain's table, smoothed out the log thereon, and very soon found he could read nothing of it. The log was written in Danish, whereof Ashton knew not a word. But he soon discovered the ship to be the *Laaland*, from Aarhus, and made out the captain's name as Enemark. The last entry in the log, being July 14th, gave him an index of how long she had been abandoned.

"Damned strange the iceberg and derelict patrol hasn't sighted and sunk her, before now," thought Ashton. But the North Atlantic, after all, is a wilderness of space, and hardly half the ship projected above water. The constant fogs, too, of those latitudes had cut down visibility. Derelicts have been known to drift for months, even years. So after all there was nothing inexplicable in this one having wandered for only about six weeks.

"One sure thing, though," Ashton decided as he threw the log into the table drawer, "none of her crew ever got picked up or made land. If they had, news of it would have been in every port. I'd have heard of it in St. John's. And patrols would have been sent to clean her up. No, she's just another 'Overdue.' And women are anxiously waiting in Denmark for news of her, just as Marian's waiting for news of me. Only these poor devils can't fight any more, to get back. And I can fight. And will!"



TWO hours from that time found his spirits badly shaken. His position, he realized, was critical in the extreme. The lazarette, that he had hoped might yield almost any amount of stores, had proved entirely empty. He had ventured down there, braving gross darkness and swarms of chittering rats, only to find all stores devoured or else ruined by the sea water that half-filled the place.

Whatever the *Laaland* had carried in the way of canned goods seemed to have been taken off by her crew. Rats and bilge-water had finished the flour, salt cod and vegetables. A noisome pit was the lazarette, down a gaping hatchway near the cabin door. Black waters surged to and fro in it, churned by the derelict's roll.

Desperate though Ashton was, he had been glad to clamor up alive out of that drowned compartment; thankful that he had taken no worse harm there than a few rat bites.

"The crew certainly made a wonderful clean job of emptying this old hulk," thought he. "Must have got away in a calm sea, and taken half a day or more to do it, after she hit the berg or whatever. Everything's gone, including all the boats."

That gave him a bad turn; for his own dory had been shattered and washed away when he had come aboard, and nothing remained that might save him, did the *Laaland* suddenly break up and sink. But more vital than this fear was hunger's lash. The bafflement of being unable to find a mouthful aboard half-maddened him.

What could have happened, to have stripped this vessel so bare? It didn't look like a mutiny, because the ship's papers were gone. The first officer must have taken those, leaving the obstinate old Viking of a captain with the log. Perhaps there might still be supplies in the booby

hatch, or possibly some of the cargo might be edible. But both the booby hatch and the cargo space were flooded, like the fo'c'stle. Though Ashton fought the rats out of every nook and corner, he discovered nothing to eat, nor any means to make fire.

"There's not enough stuff left aboard here," he told himself, "to dust a fly's eye with. And all the rats in this old Scandinavian tub are crowded aft, for more than half of her's under water. They must have fed high for a while! And now not a scrap for any of 'em to eat, but *me!*"

Not yet wholly despairing, but with realization that he must act while still some strength lay in him from the mouldy biscuit he had eaten and from the condensed milk, he searched for signal flags to set "N C" at the maintop. If he could locate flags, he still had strength enough to go up the broken ratlines and secure distress signals there. But no flags were to be found.

"That'll have to wait till later," he decided. "I can rout out some canvas and rig some sort of signal. But if I don't eat pretty soon, I'm gone!"

Food, food was still his first preoccupation. Yes, but unless he set about killing and eating rats, what food was to be had?

No Newfoundlander, with the resources that Ashton had at hand, could leave that question long unanswered. Ashton presently set about this business. Strangely disconcerting it was to work always on an angle, as he had to; never find any horizontal surface to tread, nor any vertical thing to hold by. It doubled all his labors. Added to his fever and weakness, and to considerable pain in his blistered hands as well as from his rat bites, it made any kind of work fantastically hard. But he persisted, for life itself depended thereon; and for life and a return to the girl—yes, and for vengeance on old Cap'n Lemuel, too—Ashton was determined to fight till his last expiring gasp.

The engine-room was now his objective. Knocking a couple of rats away from the scuttle, he clambered weakly down a long, greasy iron ladder, and found himself on steeply-tilted metal plates. The glory-hole, forward of the engine-room, was flooded; and brine sloshed aft as far as the bedplate of the antique, two-cylindered engine. But the engine-room, he saw by the vague light down through the scuttle, offered distinct possibilities.

In a filthy corner under the gong he found a rude bench, with a vise and a few tools. A bit of stout wire, bent to an eye and a proper curve, hacked to a barb and filed sharp, gave him a passable cod-hook.

He was not long in unstranding perhaps fifty fathom of line from the boat falls and running gear. He fastened this to his hook, weighted it with an iron bolt, and was ready to bait up.

Rat meat being the only thing available, rat-meat he used. His flung cleaver cut down one of the rodents near the binnacle close in front of the wheel. He kicked away the scuffle of squeaking cannibals that would have devoured the carcass, bore it away in triumph, chopped it up and made a good bait; then threw the rest of his quarry into the galley for further use, and carefully secured the door.

This done, he heaved his line overboard on the starboard side, and after no more than five minutes' anxious wait got a vigorous bite.

"Cod steak for dinner!" he exulted, hauling in with fresh energy. The fish was gamer than cod, though, and gave him a tussle. "Hell!" he ejaculated, as its long, gleaming body broke water. "Damned if it isn't a dogfish!"

Dogfish or not, it was welcome. Ashton was in no case to throw back even that species of small shark, bitterly hated and despised of all who seek the cod or halibut or herring. He landed it on deck, whacked its head off with the cleaver and now had bait and to spare, to say nothing of meat for half a dozen meals.

"Can't eat it raw, though," said he. His pangs of famine had been dulled to a point where raw dogfish did not appeal. He carried the head and the sharkish body in its sandpaper skin into the galley, and once more addressed himself to the task of making fire.

Only one possibility offered. Thank heaven for the revolver! Making sure the galley was secure against invasion of the rats, he kicked his way through them and once more descended into the engine-room with pistol and cleaver.

There he chopped a quantity of greasy wood from a bulkhead, into kindling. He laid a wad of oily waste at hand, took a cartridge from the gun and fastened it in the vise, bullet up. With pliers he ex-

tracted the bullet, and rammed in a little waste to hold the powder from spilling. He then reloaded the cartridge into the revolver, and at close range fired it into the oily waste.

Most of it was blown away, for Ashton had made the distance too short. Some, however, remained smoldering. Eagerly he gathered this together, gently blowing the red-winking sparks. In three or four minutes a tiny pale flame crept up. This reddened, cast off thick black smoke, and under his careful nursing caught the wooden splinters. Ere long a promising fire was ablaze on the foot-plates of the engine-room.

He fed this very cautiously, built it up to good proportions and then carried it in a steel bucket to the galley, beating away a shoal of rats attracted by the smell of the fish inside. There was coal a-plenty in the galley locker. Before long a brisk fire burned in the range, Ashton was smoking his pipe, and thick slices of dogfish were frying merrily.

"Things are beginning to look up a bit, eh?" he thought, as he fell to devouring the fish with a cooking fork. He put coffee to brew; and what of much fish and coffee—its flavor bizarre by reason of the rusty tank water—he felt strength and courage reviving. "Not too bad!" he judged, and sat on the empty potato locker, planning. "If this bloody old hulk will only float a few days more——"

His cogitations were interrupted by a muffled, grinding, wrenching sound, somewhere far below and forward. The *Laaland* gave a shudder, and up her steep deck surged gray waves, breaking now against the poop. The ship settled heavily to starboard, seemed about to roll over, then soggily righted a bit. The sound of air, whistling from some confined space, told that encroaching sea had driven out a little more of the doomed vessel's buoyancy.

"God, she's going!" cried Ashton, and started to his feet. He stood there on the now more sharply tilted galley floor, clutching the range rail. "I've got to get out o' *this!*"

He flung open the door, emerged on deck with fear-smitten, inflamed eyes. Pipe in stubbled jaws, muscles tense, he waited the final plunge.

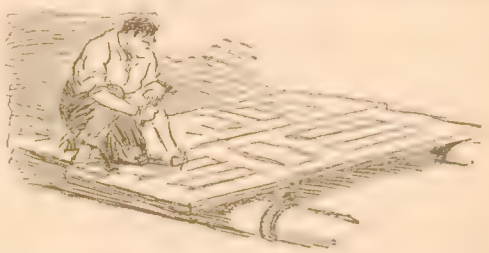
The *Laaland,* however, was not yet ready to die. Still enough life remained in that shattered hulk to keep her afloat, though lower now in the breaking seas. But how long she could endure, who might say?

Ashton began immediate preparations to save himself. A raft was now his only hope. An hour before he might have knocked the battens clear from the forward hatch, spiked planks across the hatch cover, and left the cover loose to float free. But now the hatch was entirely submerged, and he must turn to other means.

"I can't work with all these rats swarming, though," he decided; and set himself first of all to slaughter a few dozen. He threw the dogfish's head out into the runway, and when a mass of struggling rodents had collected, flailed into them with the galley poker, killing eight or ten. A few attacked him, but he beat them down and off, and finished them. The others, with shrill chipperings of rage, drew away; nor could he lure them within reach again. Well enough he knew, though, that if anything disabled him, they and hundreds more would soon reduce him to a thing like that in the captain's bunk. "Lord, if I only had some poison, now! I'd load half the fish for them and call it a good bargain!"

But, having no poison, he was forced to suspend hostilities. And the always-heavier lag of the derelict warned him to lose no more time in building his raft.

Fortune favored him by having left a carpenter's chest in the little alleyway at the top of the cabin companion ladder. With a hatchet he chopped away half a dozen doors from the small rooms about the cabin; he dragged these to the after deck; hauled thither a couple of spars hewn



from the loose raffle; laid the spars parallel and spiked the doors to them.

This took hours of time, and left him shaking with exhaustion. A devastating fever now burned in his blood. His many rat bites were growing swollen and infected, nor had he any way to disinfect or dress them, beyond going to the break of the poop and washing them in the surfs that beat up there ever higher, higher. These surfs and the rising wind—it now blew half a gale—warned him of extreme peril at hand. That the derelict could

live out any kind of a blow was starkly impossible.

The raft finished, Ashton left it there where in all probability it would float clear, smoked another pipe of tobacco, ate some more dogfish and drank a pint of coffee with condensed milk. Food, however, no longer tasted good. His mouth was dry and burning, his head ached sickly, and in his temples rapid pulses beat. Every bone and muscle was wrung with pain. An immense lassitude dragged at him. He nodded as he sat there in the galley, barricaded against the rats; the galley where he had taken good care to keep the fire burning.

"I've got to have a doss-down, and that's a fact," he decided. "An hour or two will fix me, right enough."

He forced himself to go below again—finding water now ominously rolling to and fro in the pantry there—and fetched an armful of blankets from bunks of the aft-guard. Those bunks invited him to sleep; but well he knew the place was vulnerable to the rats, and also that in case the *Laaland* should suddenly break up and plunge, he would have no more chance for his life than the very rats for theirs.

"No, the galley's the only safe place for me," he decided, and covered the floor with blankets. He filled the range with coal, bolted the door and lay down; and what with exhaustion and fever, drifted into a half-delirium. Whirling confusions engulfed him, in which Cap'n Lemuel, the *Gauntlet*, the letter and Marian all blended with liners rushing through the fog, with swarms of rats, with grotesque and menacing faces.

At last exhaustion sank him in profound oblivion. Alone, save for the horde of starving rodents, alone on the slow-heaving, sinking derelict, he slept.

Night fell. His fire burned to white ash and went out. Below him the implacable ocean gained and gained. Surges mounted to the poop, washed almost to the galley door. Lower the bow wallowed; higher rose the stern, weed-and-barnacle crusted, as if in mute appeal to the unpitying sky. In ever narrower space now the doomed rats slank and slithered, squealed and fought, killed, gnawed, and held their cannibal feast. Still the man slept, for heavy sickness lay upon him. Poison of bites, unwholesome food and drink, fever of exposure and exhaustion all took their toll of him.

And midnight came; and after an eternity dawn once more began to gray the ugly-tossing wilderness of waters. The last day of the *Laaland* commenced to glimmer through enshrouding fogs and vapors.

Other agencies of destiny were meanwhile bearing down upon her and upon her solitary and unconscious passenger.

IT WAS toward five bells of the morning watch—what landsmen call half-past six—that the derelict-patrol steamer *Huntress* thrust her bows out of the smother close aboard the perishing *Laaland*.

"Hello, there!" exclaimed old Israel Tibbo, her captain, when he descried the ugly apparition. "Damn my deadlights if there ain't an ugly-lookin' customer. Sooner we put that un in Davy Jones's locker, better it'll be!"

And he ordered up a bombing squad to take the long-boat and go aboard the sodden hulk, there to make a sudden end of her.

"Ain't this a jolly lookin' old tub, though?" asked Bosun Corrigan as he scrambed over the rail, now low to the sea, abaft the bridge. "We ain't got much a job here, I'm thinkin', to send her where she'll do no harm!"

The two common hands who followed him agreed the job would be not only easy, but one damned well done, what of the swarm of rats that chattered and skurried with clicking fangs and evil red eyes. No rat lovers, they. Now the prospect of giving hundreds of the slinky gray devils a sea burial delighted them.

Cursory was the search the three men made. One tried the galley door, found it locked, and passed aft to shout down the engine-room scuttle, where only the rush of sluicing waters and hollow echoes of vacancy replied. Another, taking a turn aft to the wheel, made sure no one was there. Bosun Corrigan went below to the cabin, and presently returned looking rather scared, with the ship's log, sextant and chronometer, also a couple of telescopes, all slung bag-fashion in a blanket.

"A hell of a thing, me sons!" he profanely assured them. "Them rats has ate up the ship's cat an' Old Man, too. Damn 'f they ain't left nothin' but a couple o' skilitons. It ain't no proper sight for Christians, now I'm tellin' *you!* Brrrr! Come on, b'ys, let's give this un a proper shot, an' make a good job of a bad un!"

"Where ye goin' to plant the bomb, bose?" asked one of the hands. "Ingine-room?"

"No. Half-full o' water she is, by the

squint I can get down this here scuttle. An' *I* ain't takin' no chances with no bombs, in no trap like that. 'Twon't take much of a shot to sink this un. Give her a good blowout rate here by the galley, an' she'll dive like a duck. Look alive with that there fuse now, me bully-b'y!"

In considerable haste to be gone from such a ship of terrors, they planted their bomb near the rail, hard by the galley and just about opposite the swaying funnel.

"There, me sons," judged Corrigan. "When that lets go, it'll bust a hole in her side big enough fer Jonah an' the whale, too, to swim through. An' down she'll go like a dipsy-lead, or I misses *my* guess! Into the boat, now, an' when I tells ye to heave away hearty, *heave!*"

He bent, struck a match and touched it to the long serpent of fuse. As this spat fire, he passed the blanket of salvaged stuff over the rail to their reaching hands, scrambled over, and jumped.

"Let her go now, bully-b'ys! Dig y'r toes in, an' pull!"

SOMETHING aroused the castaway, some vague rumor of sound that plumbed far into his fevered depths of half-delirium and stirred response not quite conscious.

He roused up, unsteady, dazed and drunk with fever and an all-numbing lassitude. His head seemed cleft with pounding pain; every artery beat thick and dull; each poisoned fibre quivered.

The ghost of an oath whispered from his blackened lips as he tried to struggle up, and fell again on the tousled blankets in that fetid, stifling gloom. Not yet fully realizing where he was or what had happened, instinct made him gasp for light and air. A dim sliver of illumination showed him the edge of the bolted galley door. He remembered, now, and dragged himself toward it; reached for the bolt, almost touched it, then with a choking groan fell back again and lay gasping heavily.

The fuse, meantime, fizzed merrily, leaving on the deck planks a crooked ashy trail. Nearer the bomb it crept and sputtered with unsteady jerks, now for a second smoldering, then at better speed devouring its fateful way. And for a moment, while Ashton lay hardly conscious behind the bolted galley door, this instrument of death, scaring the rats that crept and squealed and scuffled, burned closer to the bomb; closer and closer still.

To Ashton it seemed he heard voices, faint, far, yet human; calls and cries he could not understand, but which goaded him once more to effort.

"Crazy, eh?" he thought. "Gone crazy? Hearing things?" He tried to laugh, but no sound issued from that swollen, choking throat. He reared up again, though, and this time reached the bolt. After efforts that wrung his last ounce of energy, he slid it back. The door, released, swung suddenly outward. Ashton fell all his length, prone in the alleyway behind the rail that hid him from the fast retreating boat.

Another moment, consciousness forsook him; while ever the sputtering serpent of destruction gnawed its way on and on. Now hardly two feet separated that spitting demon of fire from the bomb.

It seemed to Ashton he heard something that hissed, went dim, flared up again. The venomous chitter of rats, was it? No, that was not the sound. Yet what else could it be?

"Damn you scuts o' hell!" he whispered; for he could do no more than whisper now. With a vast effort he opened his inflamed eyes, blinked about him, saw a thin, drifting puff of smoke, but for a second did not understand.

Fire; yes, here was fire. He recognized fire. But that suggested only the fire he had lighted in the galley. His only thought, if such vague perceptions could be called thoughts at all, was that somehow he had set the derelict ablaze.

"God, what next?" he gulped, and dragged himself up to a sort of shivering crouch. Fever and pain, lassitude and a compelling urge for rest all tugged at him. He fought them off. Fight, yes he must still fight on and on. Fire, here on deck, was now the enemy. He would fight it, strangle it with naked hands.

And then, quite of a sudden, his brain cleared. A fuse! He knew this spitting serpent was a fuse. He saw the bomb, too. Only a few inches from this deadly, smoke-spurting thing that crinkled and diminished, the bomb lay.

And Ashton understood. He knew the truth.

With a surge of passionate energy he threw himself forward, scrambling on raw hands and knees. He caught the bomb, tried to haul himself up; but his muscles would not serve. He made a monstrous effort, as in a nightmare then, to hurl the

bomb. He tried to yell. Voice and strength alike betrayed him. Dumb and stricken, he fell forward on his face.

Consciousness flicked out; but in its ultimate quiver he clutched the fuse. His hand crisped over it, held fast. The other blindly quested the bomb, tore at it—and bottomless deeps of oblivion blackly received him.

"HELL, b'ys!" Bosun Corrigan presently ejaculated, and spat brown into the cresting seas. "Made a missfire, or what? She'd oughta let go, afore now, seems like!"

"Hold hard, there!" one of the common hands made answer. "Them bombs as don't go off! *I* ain't wantin' to go back an' get there just in time to have me head blowed to Halifax, or furder!"

"That's right," the other assented. "Right fer you, me bully. I minds how Jemmy Taverts thought as how a bomb hadn't went off soon enough, last year. Mrs. Taverts made a wonnerful fine lookin' widder-woman, they do say."

"Stow that!" the bosun commanded. "Mebbe we didn't plant it fur enough aft, an' a wave carried it off. Pull round forrard o' the hulk, now, an' let's have a sight at the deck!"

They gave way, and the long-boat won to a position that gave them a sweep of the *Laaland's* steep pitched deck, to starboard. And of a sudden, a wild oath leaped from the bosun's throat.

"Man aburd, s'help me God!" he added. "Merciful Mother, what ha' we done, but murder! Row, me b'ys—row like sons o' ones' if ye never rowed before!"

And when, without any thought of self, risking their own lives they once more scrambled aboard, they found an unconscious man clutching a dead fuse.

Burned to the bone his right hand was, but in that vise-like grip the fuse was harmless. Still breathing, there he lay—bruised and bitten, scarred, swollen and fevered, blackened and very terrible to look upon. But living, living still; and dowered still with vital forces that could win once more to full and splendid strength.

"What a divil's own time the lad's been through!" Corrigan exclaimed, as with pitying care they lifted him over the rail and lowered him into the long-boat.

"Right ye are!" a common hand agreed. "What fight he's put up, eh?"

"Fight, ye may well say!" cried Corrigan, with a blistering deep sea oath. "If ever a man deserves to live, sure, 'tis him! God, what a fight!"

PIECEMEAL JUSTICE OF '49

IN ONE of the mining camps of California in '49, before miners had become distrustful of one another, a tall, handsome young man, riding a splendid horse, jogged into the place and soon departed—taking with him a bag of gold dust belonging to a resident. The robbed man chanced to discover his loss quite promptly and when he learned that the suspected thief had ridden out on the main road, gathered a posse of friends and took a short-cut over the mountains.

The miners intercepted the young man and brought him back to camp. They sent for the alcalde and he listened attentively to the testimony. At the end he turned to the culprit.

"The Court thinks it only right," remarked the alcalde quietly, "that you should return that purse of gold to its owner."

The young man, thinking himself fortunate to escape so lightly, readily assented and handed it over.

"The Court also thinks," continued the alcalde, "that you ought to pay the costs of this action."

To this also the thief agreed and inquired the amount of costs. The alcalde reckoned that two ounces of gold would cover it, and from a well-filled poke the prisoner paid out the sum.

"And now," drawled the old alcalde with a sly twinkle in his eye, "there's another part of the sentence of this Court which hasn't yet been mentioned; that is, that you receive thirty-nine lashes on your bare back—well laid on!"

Justice was meted out promptly in that time and place and there were no higher courts to appeal to *ad infinitum*. In a very short time indeed the dashing young man had material reason to regret his light fingers.

By SINCLAIR GLUCK

A Two-Part Mystery Novel

PART I

RED HEADED, TWO FISTED TERRY O'MALLEY WAS ANXIOUS TO TACKLE THE SOLUTION OF A THREATENING MYSTERY. BUT WHEN A PAIR OF THE MOST OMINOUS SECRET INTRIGUES ASSAULTED HIM SIMULTANEOUSLY HE FOUND THAT MERELY KEEPING POSSESSION OF LIFE AND HEALTH COULD BE A STERN STRUGGLE IN ITSELF

CHAPTER I

IN THE DARK

TERRENCE O'MALLEY studied the heavy, expressionless face of Sam Schenk, as he acknowledged the introduction of Chester, his host. The big man's piercing dark eyes in turn fastened on O'Malley with the force almost of a blow; and the young Irishman's untamed spirit flared. His glance tightened and focussed long enough to bring a faint smile of amusement to the fleshy, pendulous face. In a wave of intuitive insight he realized that here was a man opposed to him in every possible standard and viewpoint.

These two, Schenk and squeaky voiced old Chester, had been closeted together the last two occasions Terry had called upon Louise Chester; yet always before, the fat jowled Schenk had driven away without troubling to notice O'Malley.

This time there had been no chance to avoid a meeting, even had Schenk so desired. The two men were week end guests. Schenk had come for dinner to the Long Island country place of the Chesters; but Terry, unavoidably detained in town, arrived only in time for a late visit with Louise.

A strange, eerie oppressiveness about the place had made itself felt to Terry the moment he entered the gloomy Chester mansion. Probably Louise had felt it also, for she had seemed subdued, almost wistful during their walk in the garden. Terry asked himself whether the cordial welcome extended him had not been based somewhat upon this. Surely Louise Chester, eight years his senior and a beautiful, cultured woman never lacked attention of the most flattering kind. Yet she lived the life of a recluse, seeing almost no one save this good natured, irrepressible youth—who possessed enough common sense not to make love to her.

As he looked about the room Terry's eyes centered upon his host, Chester. The old man looked haggard, wan. Could it be serious financial difficulties which drove him into nightly conference with Schenk, the stock manipulator? Chester, Terry knew, was reputed to be as wealthy as Schenk, at least, yet the latter now exhibited no hint of worry in his manner, while Chester did.

The latter's eyes had sought his daughter's face the moment they entered. As usual, the eager, almost wistful, quality of his glance when it rested on her was hidden imperfectly. And his high pitched, challenging voice found a softer note. "Well, Louise, Sam and I have had our pow-wow and we're just off to bed. Going to turn in?"

"Why, yes, father, I think I will."

She walked over to them, kissed Chester on the cheek and then shook hands with Schenk. A moment later she had said good night and left them.

O'Malley joined the older men, and

after a little disjointed conversation the three went upstairs to their several rooms, leaving the butler to lock up.

O'Malley got ready for bed in a leisurely way and put out the light. His brain was teeming with ideas and shadowy pictures. What foolishness this sense of impending disaster! And yet——

Peculiarly restless, he got out of bed and without lighting the bracket lamp, slipped on a dressing gown and went to a seat at the window. He pulled his chair closer and leaned on the sill, staring down into the darkness, listening to the mysterious whispers from the garden below and drinking in the fragrance of the June night. As he looked down, his wandering glance picked out a small patch of a lighter color than its surroundings. His eyes fastened on it unconsciously.

Then he started and his attention abruptly focussed on the garden beneath him. *The lighter patch had moved!* A moment's close regard caused him to start to his feet. Someone was standing below him down there, staring up at the house! The patch was a man's face; and now the face had moved closer to the house, had narrowed as the prowler's head tipped forward again.

O'Malley stood motionless, his ears strained to catch the faintest sound. The face had drawn so close to the house that he no longer could see it. But in a moment he caught a sound like the scratching of a finger nail on a rough surface. His ready imagination instantly presented a possible interpretation.

Avoiding the furniture by instinct, he crept to the door, opened it silently and slipped into the hall. Here a single bulb had been left burning. By its aid he made a way to the wide oak staircase. Gathering his robe about him he tiptoed softly downward into the darkness.

He gained the foot of the stairs and started to feel his way cautiously toward the library door. His knee touched a chair, and he paused for a moment to let his eyes grow accustomed to the very faint light filtering down from the upper hall.

O'Malley was facing the library door. An instant after he paused in cautious advance and just as he started to resume it, he was frozen into startled immobility. From the darkened library came the rasp of a sudden, harsh whisper, loud enough to reach his ears distinctly, but too distant for him to distinguish either the words or the identity of the whisperer.

A dozen conjectures flashed through the young Irishman's stimulated brain. He stood motionless, listening intently. Now he caught the shuffle of abrupt movement. Between the heavy curtains, now slightly parted, which draped the door, came a momentary flash of faint white light. It was followed by two or three quick, unguarded footsteps on the hardwood floor, the thud of a blow and the jarring thump of a heavy fall.

O'Malley waited for no more. He jumped for the door, encountered another chair and sprawled on all fours, the acute agony of a dented shin wringing a gasp out of him. But he got to his feet again and darted on through the parted curtains.

With perceptions keyed to the highest pitch, O'Malley was instantly aware of movement in the pitch dark room, movement somewhere toward the far end of it and movement closer at hand. But before he even could slacken his pace his body came into violent collision with that of a man standing just inside the library door. Thrown off balance by the shock, O'Malley staggered back and to one side. The next instant some heavy, muffling material enshrouded him. Arms closed about him, pinned his own arms to his sides and wrapped the heavy material tight.

Wriggling like an eel, the young Irishman swayed this way and that in a blind instinctive effort to release himself. Then his foot caught against the leg of the man who held him. He heard a ripping sound and the tinkling clatter of released curtain rings. And he crashed to the floor, dragging his assailant and the curtain with him.

He came down on his back with his assailant on top of him. His head struck the hardwood floor with a bang that momentarily dazed. The force of the fall almost drove the breath out of his body. Still, feebly at first and then more strongly, he fought to release himself from the muffling curtain and the huge imprisoning arms.

Suddenly the pressure relaxed. He heard shouts and was conscious of a sudden light through the cloth. Then the curtain was drawn clear of his body and he found himself rolled completely over and to his back again, where he lay gazing up into a circle of angry, threatening faces. Directly above him towered Sam Schenk. To one side stood Chester and on the other, Bates, the butler.

As the three caught sight of his face, anger and curiosity left their faces to give way to blank amazement. Sam Schenk

stepped back and gave vent to a startled exclamation.

"By the Lord Henry, it's O'Malley!"

The young Irishman struggled to his feet. "You bet it's O'Malley!" he panted, "but where's the man who had hold of me and wrapped me up in that thing?"

"Why, that was I," exploded Schenk. "I heard a noise down here and came down to investigate. When I got to this door a man dashed out that open window there. Then I heard a crash in the hall and the next minute you shot through the door. Of course I took you for an accomplice, so I fell on you, hoping to catch one of the beggars at least. Mighty sorry, O'Malley!"

"Through the window?" shouted Chester. "My God!"

He whirled and ran to the far end of the library where he thrust back a curtain, disclosing a big steel safe. He caught at the handle, shook it for an instant and then turned away with a gasp of relief.

"Thank heaven, it hasn't been tampered with," he explained huskily, coming back to the group by the door. "But did you get a look at the man you saw? Would you know him again?"

Schenk shook his big bald head. "Too dark," he explained, "but he wore dark clothes and I should say he was tall; that's all I could tell about him."

O'Malley had been doing some rapid thinking. "I couldn't sleep," he cut in, "and I came down here to find a book to read. When I got to the foot of the stairs I heard a sound in here and dashed in to see what it was. Then Schenk fell on me."

The others laughed.

"Well, no harm done, O'Malley," Chester remarked, his tone vibrant with relief. "You're not hurt, are you?"

"Got a devilish sore shin from one of the hall chairs."

"Too bad," chuckled his host. "Well, guess we'll leave Bates on guard here for the rest of the night. We can notify the police in the morning."

O'Malley crossed the library door and looked at the French window which stood ajar. A small section of glass had been taken out close to the lock. The lock itself was uninjured. He stared out into the dark garden for a moment. But it was too late for pursuit.

O'Malley said good night and went back to his own room and his bed. But again he found difficulty in getting to sleep. It had been an exciting incident and naturally made him wakeful. It was exceedingly puzzling, too. The attempted burglary was obvious and easy enough to understand. But O'Malley neither had seen nor heard anything of Schenk from the time he left his bedroom door to the moment he dashed into the library. The man must have been in the library ever since his own arrival in the lower hall, if not before that. He must have been in there when O'Malley heard the whisper, saw the flash of light and heard the blow and the fall!

How long had he actually been in there? What was he doing in there? And why had his exceedingly belated activities on Chester's behalf taken the form of an attack on O'Malley?

Chapter II

ASSAULT

O'MALLEY and his friend, Bob Freeman had finished dinner and were sitting over their coffee. The two had elected to dine in one of the smaller Fifth Avenue hotels. The long, cool room in which they sat boasted neither music nor entertainment to lure the crowd. In fact, in the eyes of the usual jazz mad diner there was nothing to justify the not inconsiderable charges. As a result, few nights found more than half a dozen of the big, inviting looking tables occupied at one time. The quiet composure of the place appealed to O'Malley.

Only two tables were in use tonight, in addition to that at which he was sitting. Of these, the more distant accommodated a sedate father and mother and two little girls. The other, diagonally across the corner of the room behind Freeman, was occupied by a young man and a girl. O'Malley almost was facing their table, which was not far from where he sat. In the quiet dining-room their words came distinctly to his ears as soon as his attention wandered their way.

The girl was leaning forward in her chair, speaking earnestly and emphasizing her words with a slim forefinger on the snowy cloth. "But, Julian, it was a wonderful chance for you! I think you must be crazy to give it up for nothing, or for some incomprehensible whim. I simply was horrified when I called you up there

today and they told me you'd left. Why on earth *did* you?"

O'Malley's absent regard rested on the girl for a moment. She wore a tiny, close fitting toque of brown straw with a jaunty little rosette on one side. It was pulled down over her eyes so he could see little of her face except the line of her cheek and nose. Her slim young figure looked attractively smart in its smooth, close fitting coat and skirt of the color of coffee with cream. She turned her head for an instant and O'Malley's attention suddenly focussed, stimulated by a young profile proud looking and exceedingly winsome.

His glance swerved to the face of her companion. The young man was dark and of medium height. The regularity of his features suggested that he could be very good looking. But at the moment his appearance was marred by an expression impatient and sullen to the point of mulishness.

Catching his friend's eye, Freeman turned, followed his glance and shrugged. The girl had lowered her voice a little and O'Malley did not distinguish her next words. But they were interrupted by a juvenile explosion from her companion.

"Now listen here, Claudia! I know what I'm doing and I don't want any more advice from you. So *shut up,* will you?"

O'Malley could hardly believe his ears. The young fellow had a general air of good breeding about him. But the Irishman was angry as well as surprised. He bristled where he sat, uttered an inarticulate sound and leaned forward in his chair.

Freeman, observing the movement, reached over and caught at his arm in wrathful amazement. "Look away, you idiot!" he whispered. "Do you want to make a scene in here?"

The young man at the adjoining table had noticed O'Malley's sudden movement and seen the indignation in his eyes. He grew white and then red, sending back a regard as insolent as he could make it. Bob Freeman squirmed in his chair. "Terry," he groaned, "for heaven's sake, don't be an unmitigated ass!"

Slowly the Irishman leaned back in his chair again and let his glance return to Freeman's face. "Young pup!" he growled.

Freeman breathed a sigh of relief. "Do you mean to say," he whispered after a moment, "that you were actually ready to interfere there?"

"Well, why not? The young pup was insulting enough, wasn't he?"

"But you don't know them! Good Lord, why interfere? Why butt in on somebody else's business?"

O'Malley leaned forward, spoke in earnest. "What difference does that make? He shouldn't be rude to any woman! Somebody ought to teach him manners."

Freeman stared for a second, then broke into laughter, mirth which brought a cool, disapproving glance to their table from the girl who had been insulted. She tipped back her small head and O'Malley saw her full face for the first time.

His impressionable heart missed a beat. She was lovely. "I suppose," observed Freeman more quietly, "that you are right, Terry. For every woman's as good as the next woman—and a bit better, eh, Terry?"

But O'Malley paid no attention to this reference to his national idiosyncrasy. He felt as though a very small hand grenade had just exploded in his brain. Mixed with a growing wonder that any human being could use such language to a creature so delectable, was a lingering after impression of big violet blue eyes set wide apart and with a sweet serenity in their depths; a mouth sweet, delicately modeled and now disapprovingly firm; and a proud little white little nose, straight and very faintly chiseled as to the nostrils.

Freeman was getting impatient. He drained his coffee cup, applied himself to his finger bowl and threw down his napkin. "I thought you said any woman, Terry. Any pretty face, you mean! I've got to go and dress for a dance," he added, rising. "And I hope to Pete you'll behave yourself."

O'Malley nodded and stared at him absently.

"Oh, go to thunder!" exploded Freeman. "Good night, you wild Irishman!"

O'Malley watched him go in silence. Then he beckoned for the check and gave the waiter a bill. While he waited for his change he glanced more than once at the girl. Perhaps her companion called this

to her attention. For at the second or third glance, O'Malley found her eyes meeting his for a moment, caught her slight frown of surprised annoyance and instantly flushed a dusky red. A moment later he had pocketed his change, overtipped the waiter and hurried out.

Presently he turned westward into a side street, heading for his club. Here modern office buildings and old-time residences shouldered each other, cheek by jowl, the one resigned and sullen, the other loftily contemptuous. The block in which O'Malley walked seemed entirely deserted at this hour.

Swinging along the deserted sidewalk he happened to glance across the street, toward the entrance of a high, modern office building. By the light of a street lamp just in front of it he noticed a man's figure slouching in the doorway. The man wore a dark cap pulled low over his eyes. This and his general pose lent him a somewhat furtive and hangdog appearance. Naturally O'Malley's regard lingered on the motionless figure. But as he drew opposite, his attention was distracted suddenly.

One of the swinging doors which gave entrance to the building was pushed open and someone came hurrying through. The newcomer was a girl. She halted directly under the street lamp for a moment, looking distractedly to left and right.

O'Malley caught his breath. It was the girl of the restaurant, or someone dressed exactly like her! It was obvious at a glance that she was violently agitated.

He stared past the girl at the slouching figure of the man in the entrance. The fellow had shrunk deeper into the shadow. Now the girl came to a decision. She turned abruptly to the right and walked rapidly away in the direction of Sixth Avenue. At the same instant another door of the office building flew open and a man appeared.

By this time O'Malley was all eyes. He saw the last comer turn and address the slouching figure in the shadow, caught the rumble of his urgent voice and saw him drag his companion beneath the light. The latter jerked his thumb in the direction the girl had taken. The other then took him by the shoulders, whirled him about and set him going with a violent shove. And the fellow darted away at a lithe, silent run that carried him down the street amazingly fast.

O'Malley ran a few paces on the sidewalk, then dashed diagonally across the street. Now the runner ahead had drawn close to the girl's hurrying figure. Against the lights of Sixth Avenue, the young Irishman saw her start to whirl around, saw the runner fling himself upon her and saw the two in a confused, struggling heap on the sidewalk.

A ringing shriek of terror lent wings to the pursuer. In half a dozen bounds he had reached them. The man just was struggling to his feet when O'Malley landed a smashing blow on his upturned, startled face that sent him sprawling on his back. Then he stooped to raise the girl to her feet.

The girl's assailant held her bag in his fingers when O'Malley struck. He dropped it at once, recovered his balance and sprang to his feet again like a recoiling spring. And lest the girl be left defenseless, O'Malley was forced to drop her ignominiously to the sidewalk again.

The man with the cap had slipped his hand into his side pocket as he came for O'Malley. The Irishman caught the gleam of knuckle-dusters on his hand now. He found his own balance and as the fellow came in, leaped aside. Then he half-turned, planted his feet and let the thug have it—the "it" being a full-arm, lightning-like swing that caught the girl's assailant in the ribs and almost lifted him off his feet. The fellow sat down abruptly and hard. O'Malley waited. After an instant the man gathered himself together and staggered erect again. He turned a face, evil and glistening with blood and sweat, in O'Malley's direction for a fraction of a second. The latter stepped forward and the man instantly took to his heels.

With a snort of breathless contempt, O'Malley stooped and catching the girl by the arms raised her to her feet. In another instant they would be surrounded by an excited crowd. But this second would be given her to compose herself.

"There," he said quietly, as he released her. "Did he hurt you much? You're not injured?"

"Th-thank you," she gasped. "No, I don't— Oh, look out!"

At her word and frantic gesture O'Malley whirled about. Coming at a run and very close to him now was the hatless man. It was lucky for O'Malley that he was a rather unusually proficient boxer. His second assailant came for him on the run, struck at his face, missed as O'Malley dodged and landed a blow with his other fist on O'Malley's ribs that made the latter gasp.

O'Malley found his balance again and ducked just in time to avoid an uppercut that would have put him to sleep. Rage welled up in him, but he circled the man cautiously, feinting, guarding himself and waiting for an opening. Over his shoulder he directed a hoarse word at the girl. "Run!" he told her. But he could not spare even a glance from his formidable assailant to see whether or not she had obeyed him.

The other man, however, did spare such a glance. It was the opening O'Malley needed. He leaped swiftly in, took a hasty left hook on a tingling elbow and planted a straight right and left in the man's middle, doubling him up. A short uppercut as the fellow's head came forward took the rest of the fight out of him. He crashed backward to the sidewalk, rolled over, staggered to his feet and without a backward glance shambled away.

Two small hands gripped O'Malley's arm. "Oh! That was just wonderful!"

O'Malley turned, his face suddenly suffused with color. To hide his confusion he looked down, saw the girl's little handbag on the sidewalk and stooped to retrieve it. Beside it lay a letter and he caught this up, too.

"Why didn't you run?" he asked huskily.

"I—I'm sure I don't know," murmured the girl.

At this instant the girl demanded his undivided attention. The grip of her hands on his arm relaxed. She staggered away from him blindly and only a quick forward spring enabled him to catch her as she sank to her knees.

"You *are* hurt!" he cried contritely.

The girl stirred in his arms. "No-o," she murmured, "I'm a little—faint—that's all——"

At once O'Malley was reassured and competent again. He hung her embroidered bag over his wrist, stuffed the letter in his side pocket and catching her round the slim waist, allowed her to droop forward across his arm until her relaxed fingers almost touched the sidewalk.

She hung motionless and limp for a few seconds. Then, as the blood flowed back to her head, she stirred and struggled upright, her face faintly flushed, her eyes bright with embarrassment. "Really," she murmured, releasing herself, "I'm better now, thank you. Please——"

O'Malley nodded and held out her bag. "May I get you a drink of water or something?" he asked.

"If you could get me a taxi?" she murmured. "I must——"

She had broken off abruptly. Glancing at her face, O'Malley saw that her eyes were wide with horrified apprehension. He started and looked over his shoulder, remembering the man with the bruise. But the street was deserted behind him.

"Oh, get me a taxi, please," the girl urged him in a rush of words, "and let me go!"

The obvious inference stung O'Malley. "I must apologize for staring at you in the hotel this evening," he said curtly. "I had no intention of offending. And—I did not follow you, if that is in your mind. I saw you quite by accident when you left the building back there and I saw that beggar start after you. *Then,* of course, I followed!"

The girl eyed him, courteous but a little in doubt. She regained speedily a large measure of her poise.

"But — why?" she ventured tentatively.

"You were a woman and in danger, I thought," he explained quietly.

The girl's eyes scanned his for a moment, then swept past him and lighted suddenly. "Oh, there's a taxi! Will you please hail it for me?"

O'Malley turned and waved his hand. The taxi swept up to the curb beside them and he opened the door.

"I can't stop to thank you, now," she told him, "but I should like to express my appreciation of your——"

"It's not at all necessary," interrupted O'Malley. "It was nothing. But I suppose you will inform the police. And if the beggars are caught you may want me for a witness. I am Terrance O'Malley —" And he added his address in East Sixty-Fourth Street. "Of course, it would be an honor to hear from you," he added lamely and rather boyishly.

He saw a shadow of amusement on the girl's face. "But of course. I shall take the first opportunity. Good night, and thank you, Sir Galahad!"

As the taxi drew away from him, O'Malley replaced his hat and stood staring after it. But it rounded the corner and vanished And the young Irishman turned

and walked thoughtfully back toward his club, nursing his sore knuckles.

He went in, inquired for mail, and strolled into the reading room. In the doorway, he slid his hand into his pocket for a cigarette, started, and withdrew his hand.

For a long moment he stared down at the letter he held. It was directed to "Ward Barrett, Esq." But there was no street address and no stamp. Evidently it had been or was to be delivered by hand. It still was sealed.

Chapter III

A NEW USE FOR A MEERSCHAUM

O'MALLEY, staring down at the letter in his hand, could have cheerlessly kicked himself. He had no idea of the girl's address. The loss of the letter might be exceedingly important to her, but unless she remembered his address and wrote him for it, he had no way to return it.

Could it have been this letter the thug was after? O'Malley stared down at the plain, slightly crumpled envelope. The letter had been addressed by someone of education. So much was indicated by the "Esq."

He got up and walked out into the lobby, where he applied himself to one of the telephone books. He turned to the B's, found a list of W. Barretts two inches long and abandoned that method. Without any address it would be inadvisable to try to locate the right man in that way.

He stowed the letter away in an inside pocket and put through a long distance call for Louise Chester. His mind had been full all day of that midnight struggle in the dark, until the more recent encounter in the street momentarily had driven it from his thoughts.

Ten or fifteen minutes later he was called to the booth. "Is that you, Louise? I called up to find out whether they've caught the fellow that broke in Sunday night. Any news?"

"No, there's no news about him," came the agitated answer, "but, oh, Terry, there is news! *Terrible* news!" The quick, anxious voice held tears in it.

O'Malley mentally braced himself. "What is it, Louise?"

"Terry, the safe *was* opened Sunday night! Father says the man who opened it must have known the combination. And he stole over a hundred thousand dollars!"

"Great Scott! What was your father doing with all that money in the house?"

"It wasn't all money," came the anxious voice. "Part of it, most of it, was in negotiable securities. But they weren't listed in his name and he hasn't even got the numbers of them!"

"Doesn't he carry burglary insurance?"

"For personal possessions. Not to cover this."

"But what was he doing with such a sum?"

"Oh, Terry, I can't talk to you about it over the phone. But father is— Could you possibly run down here tomorrow? I need somebody."

O'Malley drew closer to the transmitter as though to reassure the woman at the other end. "You bet I can—tomorrow morning. Or I'll come tonight if you like."

There was no answer for a moment. "No," said Louise at length. "You couldn't get out here until long after midnight. But *do* come in the morning, Terry!"

"I'll catch a train around nine and be out there about ten-thirty," he assured her.

"All right. I'll meet you. Good-by."

It was not yet eleven, but the club was almost deserted. In view of the necessity for an early start in the morning, O'Malley decided for home and bed. He lived in an old-fashioned, brownstone residence on East Sixty-Fourth. The house had been divided into apartments, but without renovation other than additional bathrooms. It was simply a private house in which each apartment owner occupied a floor. O'Malley had the top floor. A middle-aged broker and his wife had the next. The owner of the house, a Mrs. Hippy, lived on the ground floor. And the basement was occupied by a French family.

O'Malley caught a cab and reached his home about eleven fifteen. As he let himself in and closed the front door, his landlady appeared in the hall, with hands uplifted. Mrs. Hippy was a stout, roguish lady with a false front.

"Oh, Mr. O'Malley, what a pity!" she declared. "There's been a young lady here

waiting for you for half an hour. I made her as comfortable as I could down here—such a lovely girl—but she left a few minutes ago." Mrs. Hippy grew arch, "She seemed quite anxious to see you."

O'Malley hid his annoyance as well as his earlier start of excitement, beneath a friendly smile. "What was the lady's name, Mrs. Hippy?"

Again the landlady's hands flew aloft, as though invoking Providence. "Well, there now, Mr. O'Malley! I never asked her! I should have done so, of course, before she left. But she went away quite without ceremony. I had gone to my bedroom, leaving her in my front room there. I had only been gone a minute or two when I heard the front door slam. And when I came out she was gone."

"She didn't leave a card or anything?"

"Not a thing. Just walked out. I told her you often came in by half-past eleven. But I guess she got tired of waiting."

O'Malley nodded, partly to hide his growing excitement. "Thank you, Mrs. Hippy. I hope no one is sick. And I'm sorry you should have been disturbed," he said, and dismissed her.

The characteristic smell of a room is always noticeable when one first enters it from outdoors. O'Malley was familiar with the faint fragrance of wood smoke and pipe tobacco distinguishable when he entered his rooms. But now his nostrils detected another fragrance—one totally unfamiliar here.

He lit the lights in his front room, walked through the double doorway into his bedroom, switched on the lights there and went on into the bathroom. All three rooms seemed untenanted, although the unfamiliar fragrance hung faintly in the bedroom also. After an instant he reëntered his bedroom on tiptoe, stepped softly over to his clothes closet and abruptly threw open the door.

From the dark interior came a startled exclamation and a sudden movement. O'Malley stepped back. And out into the room walked the girl he had rescued that night. Her hand was outstretched and steady. .

Staring into the muzzle of a large and formidable looking revolver, O'Malley chuckled suddenly. There had been something highly reminiscent about that perfume.

"P-put up your hands!"

The voice was less steady than the hand. The young Irishman bowed to hide his broadening grin. A vagrant flash of intuition had made him wonder whether the girl were more afraid of him or of the revolver with which she threatened him.

He stood erect again, stretched out his arm and calmly closed his fingers over the barrel of the revolver, which was not cocked. The girl gasped and put out her other hand to stop him. Whereupon he gently bent the barrel upward toward the ceiling and turned it so as to disengage the stock from her fingers. After an instant of fruitless resistance she released it with a little cry and thrust her hands behind her.

O'Malley slipped the revolver into his side pocket and stepped back again. "Won't you come here and sit down?" he inquired pleasantly. He turned away into the front room and wheeled a big chair nearer the sofa. "Come and tell me what you want to see me about." He considered this last a masterpiece of tact.

But the girl would have none of it. She stared at him for an instant through the doorway and then burst into an irrepressible peal of laughter. The next moment she had advanced to where he stood and sunk into the chair.

The brilliant, excited eyes she raised to his face held a sparkle of curiosity in their blue depths. "I—I didn't exactly want to see you," she announced, "at least, not here!"

O'Malley found that his heart was beating a good deal faster than the occasion warranted. But his unconventional visitor really was lovely, with a beauty rendered poignant by her confusion and excitement. She was clever, too, and well poised, of that he had had ample evidence now.

"Well, then," he rejoined, laughing, "what did you want to see me about downstairs? For I suppose you are the visitor of whom Mrs. Hippy told me?"

The girl stared. "Oh, is that her name? How perfectly heavenly! I mean—" she went on in demure haste, "Yes, I was that brazen caller."

"Do you know," said O'Malley suddenly, "I hope you won't be offended, but I think you are simply amazing! What a gamut of moods you must have run through tonight, altogether."

The girl studied him intently. "Well," she told him dryly, "you're rather an amusing person yourself. But now that you have my revolver, would you mind telling me why you took that letter that was in my bag?"

"It was entirely an accident," explained O'Malley. "When you felt faint I had to

jump to catch you and I stuffed the letter into my pocket. It had fallen out of your bag. Then I returned your bag but forgot the letter until after you had gone."

"Have you got it?" she interrupted swiftly.

O'Malley dived into his inside pocket and handed her the disputed letter.

She took it eagerly, turned it over and glanced up in time to catch O'Malley's smile of amusement.

"I beg your pardon," she told him hurriedly. "Of course, you would not open it. I know that now. But at first I thought that——"

"Yes," he prompted. "What did you think? That's just what I want to know. Because I can't imagine what induced you to bring a gun with you and hold me up with it."

The glance she gave him was frankly propitiatory. "Of course I did not know who you were nor anything about you," she explained. "You did, rather—stare at me—in the restaurant, you know. I thought it possible that you were after the letter, too. You see, I have no idea what it contains, but it must be very important."

"It isn't yours, then? I mean, you didn't write it?"

"Oh, no. Ward Barrett is my half-brother. My real brother is Julian, the boy you saw me with at the restaurant. He has nothing to do with this letter, though. It came for Ward by hand this morning and got mixed up with my letters."

"I wondered whether you would remember my name and address!" exclaimed O'Malley.

The girl dropped her eyes. "Yes, I missed the letter almost at once," she told him demurely.

Recognizing the justice of his punishment, her host swallowed this in silence.

The girl glanced up at him. "Mr. O'Malley," she said frankly, "you've been most awfully good to me tonight. And I want to apologize for suspecting for an instant that you took the letter purposely. I'm going to go further and ask you to help again. Frankly, now that you've given it back to me, I'm almost afraid to take it."

O'Malley stared. "You mean that you were followed here?"

"You are a very acute person, sir!" his visitor smiled up at him. "Yes, I think I was. You see, I went straight home when you put me in that taxi. Then, finding that Ward had not come home, I left a note for him and told him I was coming here. I went out and got a taxi, but I realized almost at once that another one was following me. And downstairs in the vestibule, I watched it shoot past and pull up farther down the street. A man got out and walked back past the house. Then Mrs. Hippy opened the door and I couldn't see any more."

"But the letter must——"

The telephone shrilled suddenly, interrupting him and startling them both. O'Malley excused himself and took up the receiver.

"Is this Mr. Terrance O'Malley?" It was a man's voice, urgent and imperative.

O'Malley acknowledged that it was.

"Are you alone?" came the next question. And when the Irishman said he was not, "Pardon me, but is there a young lady with you?"

O'Malley chuckled. "Rather a leading question," he suggested. "To whom am I speaking?"

"My name is Ward Barrett."

"Yes, your sister is here," returned O'Malley, grinning over his shoulder. "Do you want to speak to her?"

Over the wire came a crisp affirmative. "You bet I do. Thanks. Put her on the wire, will you?"

As he relinquished the telephone to his visitor, the young Irishman decided that Barrett sounded like a man accustomed to having people obey him.

Although he tried not to listen, O'Malley could not help hearing the girl's end of the conversation, mostly hurried affirmatives. But in a moment she launched into a brief description of her visit to O'Malley and his reception of her. And he wandered off into the next room.

Presently she called him back. "My brother wants to speak to you," she announced.

He caught up the receiver.

"Hello, Mr. Barrett," he began inquiringly.

The voice that answered him was pleasantly modulated now.

"How do you do, Mr. O'Malley? I want to take this opportunity to thank you for your rescue of my sister and for your courteous treatment of her, under what

must have been unusual circumstances. And I want to ask you another favor. Please keep that letter at your house and bring my sister home. Don't let her take it with her. I'd call for her, but I can't possibly get away just now.

"Would you mind hiding the letter in the most unlikely place you can think of? I should rather like to see it. And in view of the attempt to take it from my sister and——"

"Exactly. I'll do that, too. And I'll bring Miss Barrett home at once."

Barrett thanked him again. They said good night and O'Malley hung up. He caught a murmur of amusement as he turned away from the telephone. The girl had risen to her feet and was waiting for him near the door.

"My name," she told him gravely, "is Claudia Hunt. Shall we go?"

O'Malley bowed with equal gravity. "Just a moment, Miss Hunt," he demurred.

He stood staring about the room for a moment or two. Then he walked to a tabouret on which were ranged a number of pipes. He selected a large meerschaum, disengaged the stem from the bowl and walked over to the table on which the girl had left the letter. Without a word, he rolled it into a long spill about half an inch thick, slipped it into the capacious stem of the pipe and rejoined the two parts. Then he replaced the meerschaum on the tabouret and caught up his hat.

"And now," he laughed, with an exhilarated ring in his voice, "now for the man who followed you. I still have your revolver in my pocket!"

Chapter IV

"I can't explain!"

FIVE minutes later, in the close intimacy of the dark interior of a taxicab, the girl dropped that quality of elusive banter which her words had held, and became all grave composure. Clearly she was capable, thought O'Malley, of handling even so bizarre a situation as this one.

"Mr. O'Malley," she said, "I want to thank you sincerely for all your kindness and your unfailing chivalry tonight. And I want to apologize for imagining that you could have taken that wretched letter from my bag on purpose."

"Please, Miss Hunt," he interrupted. "Don't think that that is necessary. I mean that——"

A small hand, nervously gripping his arm, stopped him. "Oh, please, look behind us!"

They had just turned north on Fifth Avenue. O'Malley shifted round in time to see another taxi shoot out of the street they had left and head in their direction, rapidly gathering speed. His hand dropped instinctively to the revolver in his pocket and the girl was aware of the gesture.

"But," she whispered, "it isn't loaded, you know!"

O'Malley whistled softly and then laughed. "That's good," he assured her. "It will prevent accidents. And for our purpose it's as good unloaded as loaded—better in fact. Shooting's too good for that fellow who jumped on you!"

In a moment their driver slowed for the turn to the left into Central Park at the Seventy-Second Street entrance. There was very little traffic going north and the other taxi was drawing rapidly closer. Before their own driver could find a break in the downtown traffic it had pulled up behind them. Peering out of the little back window, O'Malley thought he could distinguish the figure of a man in the other cab but he could not be sure.

When the break in the traffic finally came, O'Malley was surprised and relieved to see the other taxi draw level with them and dart ahead into the park, where it pulled rapidly away from them. They rolled along more slowly, winding to the right and then to the left again.

"That fellow seems in a hurry about something," O'Malley laughed, "but I guess he wasn't after us."

Claudia Hunt glanced behind them again. "I'm glad of that," she sighed in a relieved tone. "I confess that I've had about enough excitement for one evening."

It was on the tip of O'Malley's tongue to ask her whether she knew of anything or could guess at anything in the letter which could explain the attempt to get it from her. But before he could frame a tactful inquiry, he had something else to think about.

Their taxi swerved to the left and then to the right again. Now it suddenly slowed and turned sharply to the right. The front window was closed. O'Malley jumped forward to open it, drawing the revolver as he did so. "Where do you think you're going?" he demanded.

The man applied his brakes at once. "I was making for the Seventy-Ninth Street

gate, sir," he explained. "That's the shortest way."

Although the taxi had slowed a little it had mounted a short incline and come out into a circular cul-de-sac with a fountain in the center. It was lit only dimly. The driver threw out his clutch now and jammed on his brakes. "Gee, I musta taken the wrong turn," he muttered.

They came to a stop. Glancing ahead, O'Malley saw that they had drawn up at the rear of another taxi, which was standing motionless at the side of the circular drive. Instantly he thrust the muzzle of his revolver against the driver's neck. "Start her up again!" he demanded grimly. "Drive on out of here and be quick about it, if you want to live!"

Instantly the man turned and grappled with him. A muffled scream from the girl behind him told him that she was in trouble, too. He wrenched his arm away, for the fellow had caught the wrist which held the revolver. He tried to reverse the gun and bring the butt of it down on the driver's head, but his position was too awkward and the window frame too confining. His elbow struck something and the revolver slipped from his hand. At the same instant he was gripped from behind. Long fingers settled about his throat, cutting off his breath. He struggled convulsively to draw back into the cab, for he still was almost halfway through the window. But the weight of the man behind him and the grip of the driver kept him helpless where he was.

He let go of the driver and clawed frantically at the fingers about his throat. In spite of a furious and protracted struggle, there in the dim cab, his movements grew more and more spasmodic, gradually weakened until they became little more than a sort of galvanic jerking. The dim taxi lights, the driver's straining face seemed to whirl and shift. The merciless, agonizing grip on his throat never for an instant slackened. And in a moment more his surroundings seemed to wheel sideways in a sickening sweep and fade into nothingness.

When he came to himself again he was lying flat on his back. He blinked once or twice, felt of his aching throat and struggled to a sitting position. A soft little gasp, close at hand, drew his attention. He turned his head and in spite of the vague light, made out the girl's face bending above him. He saw that it was white and glistening with tears. In the faint rays from a park lamp some distance away, he saw that she was shuddering uncontrollably.

"Oh, dear," she wailed, "I thought they'd killed you!"

O'Malley grinned in a feeble way. "Sorry to disappoint you," he croaked. "Are you hurt?"

She laughed hysterically. "I didn't mean *that!* No, I'm not *hurt!* But, oh!" she broke off, shuddering.

"What—what happened?" demanded O'Malley huskily.

"They choked you! That beast threw the door open and grabbed you from behind. I t-tried to pull him off but another man had grabbed me. He put his beastly hand over my mouth. Then you went all limp and they tumbled you out of the cab. I thought you were dead!"

"Good Lord," croaked O'Malley, "you poor girl!" He rose to his feet, concealing as best he could the fact that his head was swimming dizzily. "Come on," he added. "Let's get out of here."

With his hand on the girl's arm, partly to guide her and partly to steady himself, he moved toward the roadway which led down to the more frequented road. They reached it unmolested and walked slowly toward the gate on Central Park West. Two or three cars passed them here and O'Malley felt moderately secure again. With one hand rubbing at his painful throat he urged her, in a croak, to tell him the rest.

"Before you fell out I was struggling as well as I could," she told him. "But they dragged me out and—" She broke off, with a shudder of reminiscent repulsion.

"Fine kind of an escort, I am," muttered O'Malley savagely. "You're sure they didn't hurt you?"

"They hurt my feelings more than anything else, although they were pretty rough. There were three of them, the two drivers, I think, and another man. Oh, does your throat pain you very much?"

O'Malley groaned. "It's not my throat I'm worried about," he exclaimed impatiently. "What did they do to you?"

The girl hesitated an instant, surprised at his tone. But she was acute enough to see the anxiety for her behind his impa-

tience. And she went on without comment. "One of the men held my hands behind me. He had one hand over my mouth. The others searched me—thoroughly."

O'Malley gave vent to an inarticulate growl, torn from him by a wave of blind rage. "If I hadn't been such a fool!"

Claudia Hunt, secretly rather thrilled, went on calmly, "That was after the other man had searched you. I saw him take some papers out of your pocket and look at them under the taxi lamp. Then he swore and they searched me. They even looked in my stockings! So I guess it was the letter they wanted, Mr. O'Malley!"

Too furious to answer for a moment, O'Malley shuffled on, swearing under his breath. "Well, they didn't get it!" he burst out at last. "And they're welcome to a couple of fool letters," he added, as his hand came away empty from his inside pocket. "But, by gad, if I ever lay my hands on any one of the swine again! Did you recognize any of them?"

Claudia did not answer at once. They had reached the gate now and O'Malley led her across the street. There were two or three taxis parked in front of the Majestic. He selected one and helped the girl into it, after feeling in his inside pocket to make sure that his money had not been taken also. The taxi started for their original destination and he repeated his question.

Claudia was unaccountably silent. O'Malley waited a moment and then asked her again. "Did you, Miss Hunt?"

At that she turned to him impulsively. "I'm sorry, my friend! I'd rather not talk about that, if you don't mind. It concerns other people besides me, you see."

Surprised and rather dashed, O'Malley leaned back in his place. He was silent and they rode on, somewhat at cross purposes, until they were close to their destination.

Then Claudia turned to him again. "Mr. O'Malley," she said, "I wanted to ask you in, to see if that throat of yours is all right. But it is very late and—please don't think me ungrateful."

O'Malley had recovered himself a little. "You're mighty thoughtful," he laughed, "but I wouldn't think of coming in at this time of night; and my throat's all right really. I'll keep the taxi, which seems to be reliable this time, and see you to your door, if I may. Then, perhaps, some day, you'll let me come and call on you?"

To his surprise, his companion hesitated. "Oh," she exclaimed at last. "I don't know what to say! I don't want to seem discourteous. And yet—there's a reason why you shouldn't come!"

She stepped closer to him, saw the hurt embarrassment on his face and grasped his arm with an impulsive hand.

"I'm *not* ungrateful or unappreciative!" she cried hurriedly, "and come if you will, when you have met my brother. But I—it would be better if you didn't, strange as it sounds. Oh, please don't misunderstand! I can't explain. But it has nothing to do with you personally, Mr. O'Malley, I can assure you."

With that crumb of comfort he had to be content.

Chapter V

A MAN IN A HURRY

THE taxi pulled up before his door. O'Malley paid the man, bade him good night and let himself into the house as quietly as possible. He tiptoed upstairs to his own floor, opened his door which he had left unlocked as usual and switched on the lights. Then he stifled a gasp of amazement and stood motionless, his startled eyes swiftly traversing the room.

Certainly it *was* his apartment, for he recognized a number of his personal belongings. But aside from that the appearance of the front room was highly unfamiliar. In the far corner stood his writing desk, now a series of black voids. The drawers were piled on the floor beside it. And about desk and drawers his letters, papers and writing material lay scattered on the floor, like the melting débris of a last week's snow storm.

To his left, between door and windows, his dignified davenport had been pulled out and tipped over backward, so that it now lay gaping at the ceiling, its six stubby little legs projecting, stiffly aghast, into the room. The sacking at the bottom of it had been torn away in part, and sagged to the floor.

Every upholstered chair in the room lay on its back or side and had been treated the same way. And it was obvious, once O'Malley recovered from his surprise, that someone had searched the place thoroughly and minutely in his absence.

With rising anger he tramped through to his bedroom, avoiding the overturned furniture. The sudden flash of the electric lights showed him an even worse state of confusion in here. His clothes closet stood

open, with his clothing tumbling over each other into the room just as they had been impatiently thrown down. The drawers of the chiffonier had been taken out and piled to one side, while their contents also strewed the floor. Even the bed had been stripped, the bedclothes thrown to one side and the mattress pulled half to the floor.

O'Malley strode to the back. The blinds were up and he saw at a glance that both windows were locked, although he did not usually keep them so. Still, Mrs. Hippy often locked them. The intruder had not gained entrance that way.

The bathroom cupboard also had been searched, he found, but it had not been greatly disturbed. And after a moment he climbed over the strewn clothing and returned to the front room. There should be half a dozen stock certificates in the desk. He had left them there Friday, intending to take them to his deposit box, the next time he went to the bank.

After a few minutes' search he found them all. Now he turned to the little tabouret by the fireplace. It had a compartment and this gaped open. His pipes lay about the floor, the meerschaum among them.

He pounced on it, unscrewed the mouthpiece and drew it clear. The letter, curled as he had left it, projected from the stem. O'Malley, planted in the midst of his violated and disrupted domicile, stared down at it with a grin of triumph. "Foiled again," he chuckled, forgetting his sore throat. "If the beggars had finished by looking in this, they would never have torn the place up the way they have. But I'm glad they did not."

It took O'Malley a few moments to restore the front room to order. He did not want Mrs. Hippy to have heart failure when she saw it in the morning. When he had picked up his papers, righted the furniture and restored the drawers to the desk, he locked the door from the front room to the hall, put out the lights and went back to his bedroom, leaving open the intervening double doors. As an afterthought, he had picked up the meerschaum. And he laid it on the little night table beside his bed.

O'Malley naturally took it for granted that now, at two in the morning and after an evening of crowded adventure, he was entitled to an unbroken rest; but hardly had he settled into the deeper sleep of complete oblivion when he became vaguely aware that something, some unfamiliar influence, was dragging him slowly back again to the surface of consciousness. He lay staring into the darkness for a moment, with a sensation of bewildered uneasiness, before it occurred to him to look at the clock beside his bed. The luminous hands marked a quarter past two.

The little night table on which the clock stood was between the bed and the window. From the face of the clock, O'Malley's glance strayed to the open window beyond. The line of the half-lowered blind stood out stark against the faintly luminous night sky. One side of the window frame also rose perpendicular. But the farther side was blotted out by an irregular outline, motionless but entirely unfamiliar.

He lay staring at this for a moment, sleepily, trying to explain it as a natural phenomenon—his clothes on a chair, a garment hanging by the window, or something of the sort. Then suddenly his heart bounded up. *The irregular outline was receding!*

For a single second of stunned uncertainty, O'Malley lay motionless. Then he gathered his faculties together. With a swift, unbroken movement he flung back the bedclothes and leaped from the bed on the far side from the windows.

It took him an instant to reach the door. Fumbling furiously, he found and pressed the electric light switch, whirling about as the lights flashed on. The sudden flood of radiance blinded him for an instant. But the intruder by the window had been in the dark also. And O'Malley was given an instant to gain clarity of vision. He had time to step out from the wall and to throw up his arm, just as the dark-clad figure of a man in a cloth cap whisked round the foot of the bed and came for him, aiming a vicious blow at his head with something that flashed dark brown, shiny and flexible in the light.

The blackjack sang down past his face and curled viciously round his arm. His right fist flashed out and caught his assailant fair and true between the eyes, sending him staggering back. He was jerked sideways by the thong of the blackjack about his wrist, the business end of the weapon having clung to O'Malley's arm. In that instant the Irishman recognized him as the thug that had attacked Miss Hunt earl-

ier in the evening. O'Malley pulled his arm free of the weapon and sprang in again, all his anger at this attack and his mortification at the second outrage in the taxi, implicit in his swift, vengeful blows.

His midnight visitor defended himself as best he could, ducking this way and that, the blackjack, still pendant from his wrist, bobbing wildly. Aside from an occasional grunt of pain or a gasp for breath, neither uttered a sound. The intruder gave ground rapidly, at first attempting only to defend himself and avoiding O'Malley's blows with some skill. Then he backed into the corner of the chiffonier with a crash that must have shaken him badly, one of the Irishman's fists stung his cheek and he swerved sideways and tried to close.

At the same instant O'Malley was aware that the man had glanced swiftly downward. And he leaped back just in time to snatch his bare foot from beneath a savagely planted heel. This unsporting attempt to cripple him supplied the slight fillip necessary to send O'Malley berserk with rage. To crush and disfigure that vicious, glistening face bobbing before him, seemed now the goal of all desire. And he went to the work with all that was in him.

The intruder was of medium height but young and stockily built. At O'Malley's swift retreat he paused for an instant. Then, having failed to crush the Irishman's foot, he tried to finish him with the blackjack. He swung the small end of the weapon into his hand by catching up the loop which encircled his wrist. The deadly loaded club flashed up over his shoulder and he darted forward with a hoarse oath.

O'Malley's rage had not lessened his coolness. A swerving sideways leap enabled him to escape the descent of the weapon at the last instant. He brought up against the side of the bed, ducked, swerved again and planted a fist in the man's solar plexus, following it with a heavier swing that barked his knuckles on his opponent's bullet head.

Luckily the two blows jarred the intruder off his balance. And seeing his advantage, O'Malley discarded caution, leaped forward and swung right, left and right again, with all his weight behind the blows. O'Malley's opponent ducked the first blow. The second he managed partly to ward off. But the third caught him squarely on the edge of the jaw and sent him crashing to the floor.

O'Malley crouched above him, breathing heavily. The man had been almost limp when he fell. Now he rolled from side to side once or twice, shuddered spasmodically and lay still. The vicious, pale blue eyes were half-closed. The square, unshaven face with its unusually prominent cheek bones was pasty looking and lined with evil living. It was dirty, too, and streaked with sweat. And across the blotchy forehead a wisp of dark hair lay plastered to the skin. Even in repose it was a most unlovely visage.

"Well, you dirty thug!" grunted O'Malley, "guess I'll know you again. And, by gad," he added more cheerfully, "I guess you'll know me!"

The intruder lay still. Abruptly O'Malley stood erect, his glance darting to where he had left the meerschaum pipe. The two parts of it lay side by side on the little table by his bed. But the letter was nowhere to be seen!

O'Malley stepped swiftly over the prone intruder and circled the foot of the bed. On the floor by the table lay a piece of paper. He stooped and caught it up. It was a torn and crumpled envelope. By fitting the jagged parts together he read the familiar inscription, "Ward Barrett, Esq." A hasty search in the vicinity failed to reveal the letter which the envelope had contained.

The Irishman went back to his prostrate victim. An instant later he had drawn from the man's side pocket a folded sheet of ordinary linen writing paper, crumpled and bent as the envelope had been, by being rolled into a spill to fit into the meerschaum. These telltale folds were sufficient evidence that he had found what he sought and, incidentally, what so many other people seemed to be seeking.

It never even entered O'Malley's head to read the letter. He stuffed it into the pocket of his pyjamas until a better hiding place should occur to him. Stepping over the intruder once more, he went into the front room and switched on the lights. A glance had shown him that one back window and the door from his bedroom into the hall still were locked.

The windows in the front room also were locked but the door into the hall stood open now. The key was still in the lock on the inside and the latter had not been forced. There were fresh looking

scratches on the outside keyhole. Evidently the intruder had picked the lock in some ingenious way.

O'Malley walked over toward the telephone and suddenly halted in his tracks, startled by a sound from the bedroom. Then he raced back through the double doors. The floor was bare where the man had lain. And as O'Malley entered, the bedroom door just was closing. He dashed for it as it closed in his face. He heard the scrape of a key and wrenched at the handle a second too late. The intruder had recovered, unlocked the door and locked it again from the hall.

O'Malley whirled and raced back to the front room, darted through it into the hall and found himself in baffling darkness. He caught an unmistakable scraping, bumping sound and plunged forward toward the ladder at the back of the hall, which led to the roof. As he reached it, the tin covered roof trap fell over onto the roof with a hollow bang and against the night sky O'Malley saw silhouetted for a second a couple of nimble legs and a bent body.

Forgetting his bare feet, the Irishman shot up the ladder and scrambled out onto the roof. He stood erect, to find himself staring out over a long line of almost level roofs, with a shadowy running figure already several houses away.

He had made only a few strides when he caught his foot in some obstruction and measured his length with a crash on the tin roof, knocking most of the breath out of him. By the time he had got to his feet again the midnight intruder had disappeared. And O'Malley sat down on a low coping to nurse a badly scraped foot and to swear under his breath. Pursuit was out of the question now.

Presently the Irishman was moved by curiosity to inspect the obstruction which had tripped him. He searched about with his fingers and then presently saw it. It was a light rope about half an inch thick and securely fastened to a vertical iron pipe. From the big pipe it led to the edge of the roof and hung down outside his bedroom window. It was knotted every few inches, which suggested the man's method of entry.

In a flash, O'Malley guessed what had happened. The fellow had climbed down the rope to his window, which had *not* been locked. This had been after the hold-up in the taxi but before he got home again. He had entered, locked the window behind him, slipped out into the hall and opened the roof trap from the inside. Then, after searching the place and failing to find the letter, he had hidden in the darkened hallway until O'Malley came home and went into his rooms. After that he had probably looked through the keyhole, seen O'Malley look at the pipe and watched where he put it.

Curiosity satisfied, O'Malley unfastened the rope and coiled it. He took it down the ladder with him, pausing to close and lock the rooftrap securely. Then he returned to his own rooms, locked both doors from the inside and threw the rope in a corner.

Chapter VI

TWO TRAILS CONVERGE

O'MALLEY'S brief rest was not broken again until seven-thirty, when the shrilling clamor of his alarm clock brought him upright in bed, alert and tense. When he had shaved and dressed he took the letter from his discarded night attire and stood with it in his hand, staring about his bedroom in perplexity. Presently an idea occurred to him and he walked on into the front room.

In the center of his living room stood a large table. It contained a single big drawer in which O'Malley kept a couple of pack of cards, some poker chips and a few pencils. The drawer had been pulled out when he came home the night before. But the searcher or searchers had not removed it altogether, like the others, because its meager contents could be tabulated at a glance.

O'Malley, however, removed it. He took out a few articles it contained, drew it out of the table and turning it upside down, laid it on the carpet. Then he went to the desk for a large sheet of paper and a bottle of mucilage.

The letter, now minus its envelope, he laid still folded on the under surface of the bottom of the drawer. He applied mucilage to the edges of the large blank sheet and pasted these down to the wood in such a way that the paper completely covered the letter beneath it. He gave the mucilage a few minutes to dry and spent the interval in a brief inspection of the hall outside, to be sure that he was free this time from espionage.

Having hidden the letter to his satisfaction, he caught up his hat, locked both doors into the hall, for Mrs. Hippy had a key of her own, and left the house. He had breakfast in the station and caught his

train with a minute or two to spare. Once seated, he settled down to a review of the happenings of the preceding night. In one direction his cogitations did not take him very far. The most minute and careful consideration of every detail that he could remember did nothing to suggest a solution to the main mystery. He felt reasonably certain that every move made by every actor in last night's events had had the letter as its prime motive. It was obvious that, to Barrett and to Miss Hunt on Barrett's behalf, the letter was of importance. It was equally obvious that the possession of it meant a lot to at least three other gentlemen of unpleasant appearance and doubtful morality.

But why all these people were so vitally interested in it did not appear. He had not the slightest clue as to its contents. Nor could he read it, even now that it was without an envelope, without violating his code and betraying the girl's trust in his ethical decorum. Neither could he hazard a guess as to the secret of that other mystery; that encounter in the office building, between Claudia Hunt and the man with the bruise.

It was not, he felt sure, that the girl had been insulted by the fellow. There had been a kind of shocked bewilderment as well as fear in her attitude when she looked back at the building. The shock that could bring such a look into her eyes had gone deeper than an insult from a cad could go, to a girl of her self-possession and poise. But what the shock had been and whether it was connected with the letter in some way was beyond O'Malley.

In another direction, as the train whirled him onward, his musing reflections brought him unease. This girl he had rescued and who had invaded his rooms; who had stood by him after the assault in the taxi, who had seemed to trust him and then shown herself unwilling to have him call, had taken possession of his thoughts. Before his retrospective vision her troubled face, her sweet eyes of a girl, stood out as distinctly as though the girl herself were there. Unconsciously he fell to adding details, alluring half-remembered details, to the picture. And the swift response startled him with its vividness, bringing in its train a pang of delight so keen as to be almost painful.

O'Malley started and drew himself erect in his seat. Some primitive instinct of his independent spirit bade him strive to banish this disturbing vision ere it captured and enslaved him. Swift reaction set his thoughts ahead to Louise Chester and her father. But almost without his knowledge came the returning swing of the pendulum. When the trainman announced his station, the hitherto fancy free young Irishman was deep in daydreams, in which the winsome face of Claudia Hunt led him over hills and dales to some distant land of radiant delight beyond the horizon.

O'Malley was still in something of a daze when he found himself on the station platform, hurried thereto by a slightly ironical guard just as the train was pulling out. But the sight of Louise Chester beckoning to him and the shock of her pale, harassed face drove his own affairs to the right about and filled him with swift alarm on her behalf.

"Louise!" he asked gently as he took her hand, "is there anything fresh? Has anything happened?"

Louise Chester shook her head. "Here's the car, Terry. Get in and we'll drive back at once," she urged, leading him along the platform. "I'm terribly worried about my father. I don't want to leave him any longer than I have to."

Chester was not in evidence when they entered. Louise excused herself and left O'Malley for a few minutes. Presently she rejoined him, looking a little relieved. By mutual consent they wandered out into the garden. As soon as they were out of earshot of the house, Louise took his arm and drew closer. "Terry," she said, "this is an awful business. I'm going to ask you to forgive me for sending for you and to forgive me in advance if I'm forced to be a little inhospitable. I hardly know which way to turn. I need someone badly to steady me. And so I urged you to come. My father is almost beside himself. You see, he had about a hundred and thirty thousand dollars in that little safe. He has some very speculative investments or something and he needed that money desperately for margin, I think. Now that it is lost, even temporarily, he is almost insane. He says he is ruined, Terry!"

"Great Scott, Louise, it can't be as bad as that! Are you sure? He must have means of tiding the thing over until that money is recovered. What about Schenk?"

Louise shook her head mournfully, her

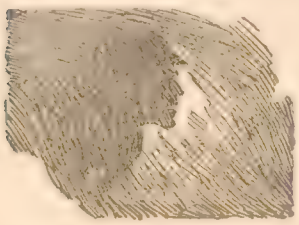
face bewildered and sad. "I don't understand much about these things," she said, "but he seems to think the position is desperate." She turned in answer to a call in a woman's voice from the house. "I'll have to go, Terry. I want you to stay to lunch if you will. My aunt will be here on the two o'clock train. When she comes, I'm driving into town to do an errand for my father. I want you to let me drive you in. Then I can tell you what there is to tell. I can't very well, just now. But just having you here helps me more than you can imagine. Oh, yes. There's a detective here who wanted to talk to you. I told him you were coming out today and he's waiting for you in the library. Do see him and tell him all you can."

With a parting smile full of unconscious pathos in its effortful bravery, she left him and hurried back to the house.

O'Malley found a detective from New York police headquarters pacing the library floor. He introduced himself and presently detailed to the man everything that he knew of the robbery on Sunday night. When he had finished the detective nodded and thanked him. "Form any conclusions yourself, Mr. O'Malley?" he inquired abruptly.

O'Malley thought for a moment. "Nothing very definite," he answered, "and aside from that, I'd rather not say."

The man grinned at him. "Think that light you saw and those noises might have been the result of your fall when you hit that chair in the hall?" he asked.



O'Malley shook his head.

"And you saw no one in the lower hall as you came down the stairs, eh?"

"Neither sight nor sound," returned O'Malley.

"All right. Much obliged to you."

When the gong sounded for lunch, Louise came to the library where O'Malley had ensconced himself. The detective had disappeared and she found the Irishman studying the dimensions of the room, pacing the distance from hall door to safe and from safe to window. He was deep in baffled speculation. He had fixed firmly in his memory every detail of the Sunday night robbery which had come beneath his direct notice. And his vivid recollection and powers of constructive intuition had led him to a startling conclusion.

Just before he entered the library that night he had heard a whisper. It had come from just within the library door. It had been followed within a second or two by the sound of a blow and a heavy fall. These, a studied recollection told him, had been much more distant, almost certainly at the far end of the room and therefore somewhere between the safe and the window about thirty feet away. Certainly the flash of light had come from that direction. Then, almost without pause, he had dashed into the library, to collide with Schenk *within a foot or two of the door!*

Someone had struck a blow. Someone else had fallen, at the far end of the room. Therefore, there had been three persons in the room, not two, when he entered! Presumably the other two had both been men and had both escaped through the window, while he was struggling with Schenk. And it had been Schenk who had uttered that unintelligible whisper!

Chester was prostrated and confined to his room, so Louise and O'Malley were alone at lunch. The presence of servants kept them to a desultory conversation on topics other than the robbery.

They still were at lunch when Chester's sister arrived. Louise took her upstairs and remained up there with her until one of the men brought a small roadster to the door, a little after two. Half an hour later the sick man's daughter came down and told O'Malley that she was ready to start.

The first part of the drive back to town took them over good roads almost free of traffic. Once clear of the village, he took the wheel and Louise settled down beside him. "Terry," she began presently, "I'm in a horrible position. I don't know what to do, and I want your advice. I'm going to tell you something that I've never mentioned to anyone before. It isn't easy, but it's easier than other alternatives."

O'Malley nodded. "Go ahead, Louise. Anything you tell me will be safe, as long as you want me to keep it to myself."

Louise gazed ahead of her with unseeing eyes, unconscious of the loosened tendrils of soft hair caressing her delicate face. After an instant she sighed stormily and turned back to him. "You see," she began, "I once loved a man very much, Terry. He was everything to me. And —he jilted me."

"Louise! I don't *believe* it!"

"Nevertheless it's true," she affirmed tonelessly. "He had a reason, of course. In his eyes it must have been sufficient.

But I—" she broke off and turned away from him.

"His father was a speculator," she went on presently. "He was connected in a business way with my father. They knew each other well and were friends. Then the father of the man I loved failed suddenly and shot himself. It was hinted that my father and two other men had betrayed and ruined him to their own profit.

"Probably the rumors were exaggerated, but there was some truth in them. Naturally, perhaps, his son broke our engagement. Since then I never have seen him. He is a power in Wall Street now himself. And, Terry, father swears that he has had something to do with this robbery; that he knew of my father's critical position and struck at the right moment for complete revenge! Father has no proof, of course, but he is certain about it. You see, my father needed that money for additional margin. Without it he practically is wiped out, he says."

"What makes your father think——?"

"He is short on a lot of stocks and he has discovered that my—that this man has been buying them up. And, Terry, the robbery was such a queer one! The man who opened the safe knew the securities were in it, had the combination!"

"Did this man know the combination?"

"Father says he doesn't see how he could have got it, unless someone in the house betrayed it to him."

"I don't see how anyone could have betrayed it, then," urged O'Malley.

"Somebody got hold of it, somehow."

A part of her hard won composure was slipping from Louise. She put out her hand in a pleading gesture. "Oh, Terry, what *am* I to do? I—I love him still, Terry. I always shall. That is why I have never been able to forgive my father. Shall I go to the police or let father go and tell them of such suspicions? They are nothing more. On the other hand, have I the right to withhold anything, however vague, which may help my father? Oh, Terry, see if you can tell me where my duty lies!"

"Wait a minute, Louise," said O'Malley gently. "Has your father *any* foundation for his suspicions other than the obvious motive of revenge?"

Louise hesitated. "Only one thing," she admitted at last. "The man is connected with the bank from which he drew the cash and securities. Otherwise, no one could have known he had them in the house."

O'Malley drove on for a mile or two in silence. "I'll tell you what I think, Louise," he said at last. "I think that you have no right to direct suspicion against a person without *some* proof. If this man is in Wall Street, a breath of a hint that the police were investigating him would do him irreparable harm, possibly precipitating an attack upon his interests if nothing worse. I have nothing to do just now; and I'd rather help you than anything I know. You might let me investigate on my own a little. What do you say?"

"Terry! What in the world do you mean?"

"Just what I say, Louise. I have a few vague suspicions of my own that I'd like to verify or disprove. Suppose, along with them, I see what I can learn about this man whom your father suspects. I believe I could learn something, Louise. And it seems a fairer way than telling the police. Especially if — you love him still."

Louise was silent for a moment. Then she turned to him impulsively. "Oh, Terry, would you really do that?"

"You bet I will, Louise," he answered warmly, "but you'll have to tell me his name," he added, smiling.

The woman beside him turned abruptly away at that. But in a moment she had swung back again, her eyes lighting with a faint and tremulous inner glory that seemed almost to transfigure them.

"His name," she murmured, "is—Ward Barrett."

Chapter VII

The Green Blot

LOUISE CHESTER'S tremulous announcement came to O'Malley as one of those astounding coincidences which seem utterly improbable—and with which everyday life abounds. The surprise of it tightened his grip on the wheel. The slight swerve the car made brought a little cry of alarm from the woman at his side.

O'Malley instantly recovered himself. His first natural impulse to tell her of last night's experiences. Then a swift instinct bade him guard, for the present at least,

the secret of those exciting events which now had grown in retrospect as delicious as they were amazing. But a moment's thought brought him round again to the point of sharing what he knew with her. He owed it to their friendship to tell her all he knew about Barrett. He could trust her discretion.

While the fast little car drew nearer New York, purring contentedly as it lapped up the intervening miles, he detailed to his companion his encounters with the men in search of the letter. He mentioned Barrett's name to point his narrative. But he said nothing of the impression made upon him by Claudia Hunt.

When the story was done, her reaction to it came as a complete surprise to O'Malley. "Terry!" she exclaimed, "he's in danger! I'm sure he's in danger!"

"Who do you mean?" he demanded ungrammatically.

"Why, Ward, of course. Can't you *see* he is?"

O'Malley was completely at a loss. "How in the world do you make that out?" he exclaimed. "Miss Hunt is in danger, if you like. At least she was. But I don't see where Barrett comes in."

Louise was silent for a moment. They were crossing one of the bridges over the East River and she gazed out over the water with a strained concentration in her glance. "Can't you see, Terry?" she urged at length. "That letter is evidently to warn him of something. His enemies, whoever they are, are anxious to prevent its reaching him."

O'Malley laughed reassuringly. "Somebody evidently wants to get hold of it. But I don't see that that proves Barrett in danger. Your attitude seems a little illogical. One minute you are ready to inform the police against him. The next, you're worried for fear *he's* in danger."

"I love him, Terry," she murmured. "I always shall, though I haven't seen him for years. He *must* be a good man, Terry!"

O'Malley made no answer. He secretly wondered how much reliance could be placed on the testimony of so obviously prejudiced a character witness. Not very much, he thought.

Perhaps she divined what was passing in his mind. For she leaned back in her seat and changed the subject abruptly. "I'm going to see Mr. Schenk for father. His office is way downtown, you know. Shall I drop you somewhere, Terry?"

"I'll drop myself at the nearest east side subway. I promised to take that letter to Barrett. And I'm going to keep my promise right away. I'm going to read it first, however. What you have told me justifies that. Maybe the letter will give us a clue to both mysteries. Of course I'll tell him I've read it. Shall I mention seeing you?"

"Oh, *no!* Don't do that. But—you will tell me how he seems? If he looks—happy?"

O'Malley smiled at her lowered eyes. "You bet I will, Louise, and don't worry. Everything will come out all right. Good-by."

O'Malley plunged down into the subway, on his way uptown. When he reached his house, and gained his room, he locked the door behind him, took out the drawer of his table and reversed it, lifted one edge of the pasted sheet and drew out the letter. A summer storm was blowing up and the room had darkened. O'Malley walked to the window and sheltering himself behind the curtains so that he could not be seen from the street he opened the letter. His expression grew more and more puzzled as he glanced through it.

My Dear Ward, (it read)

Only one question remains awaiting my approval and my subscription. Evans wants more equity or different interests affirmed between you. Attacking unheard of quotations Bessemer alliance. On bad debts no allowances. Let Baker's margin stand. Script enhances eastern issues, but Evans prefers same offer until seeing you. Good service to Baker makes Evans's attacks unhealthy. Encouraging activity should not Asphalt eventually quieten. But feel new activity precludes security.

This rigamarole of business jargon was typewritten on the first page of a folded double sheet. It bore no signature. But halfway between the last line and the bottom of the page there was a large, irregular green blot, as though someone carelessly had let fall a drop of green ink.

O'Malley reread the letter with the closest attention. It was possible to make some fragmentary sense of it. Evidently

a person named Evans was involved in a deal with Barrett and the writer. It looked as though the writer were hinting at double-crossing Evans with the assistance of somebody else named Baker. It seemed that the writer and Barrett were contemplating a combined attack on some merger in connection with Bessemer steel, or on another group of traders who were bulling that issue. The reference to Asphalt, an active and well known stock was more obscure. The writer had taken pains to word his message so that it would have little meaning to anyone except Ward Barrett.

O'Malley disregarded the blot of green ink entirely at first, setting it down, naturally enough, to carelessness on the part of the writer. But when he had read the message through again he turned the page, to see whether the letter contained any other writing. And now he made a curious discovery.

The other three pages were blank. But the light from the window struck across them on a slant. And on the third page, which had been directly under and against the reverse side of the first, O'Malley noticed an irregular and very faint indentation. One edge of it had been disclosed to him by the tiny shadow it cast. Closer inspection showed him that the indentation corresponded with the blot of green ink on the first page!

The inference was obvious if amazing. The blot of green ink had special significance. It had been made, not by a careless pen, but by a metal stamp of some sort, applied with sufficient force to indent both sheets!

He held the letter to the light, spreading open the double sheet. But there was nothing more to be seen except the manufacturer's watermark, which O'Malley recognized as that of a linen paper to be bought at any drug store.

O'Malley admitted to himself that he could make little of the letter which would justify the tremendous interest taken in it by so many determined individuals. But he was very much impressed by that green blot. That anyone should take the trouble to think out and arrange for so obscure a signature lent the letter an enhanced importance in his eyes. And the information it contained was of tremendous importance to several persons at least.

Suddenly the idea of a code message occurred to him. He studied the words again, trying to make sense of the message by skipping one or two words each time. He tried rearranging the words and even the letters but found no key. And finally he came to the half-hearted conclusion that the message made too much sense as it was to be a cipher message.

But if he could make nothing of it, perhaps an expert could. He went back to the table and copied the letter on another piece of paper, omitting Barrett's name. He even took the trouble to reproduce at least the shape of the blot, by means of a piece of tracing paper. Then he folded the original letter and slipped it into an inside pocket.

His copy, bearing the pencil tracing of the blot, he put away in the hiding place under the drawer, pasting up the sheet of paper again. That done and the drawer in place again, he left his rooms, locking them behind him. It was nearly five o'clock and the original letter must be returned to Barrett. O'Malley had promised himself that the interview would be an interesting one.

He dropped from a Fifth Avenue bus at that familiar corner in the Forties and walked rapidly westward toward the building from which he had seen the girl emerge the night before. It was on the north side, and therefore across the street from him. The street was for westbound traffic only; and as the white light was shining on the avenue, O'Malley started across the street with a single glance to the right and behind him.

It happened, however, that a taxi, parked near Fifth Avenue and heading westward, had started moving slowly ahead as he entered the block. When O'Malley stepped off the curb, the driver of the taxi pressed down his accelerator and his vehicle shot ahead, gathering speed with a rush.

O'Malley, cutting diagonally westward and north, heard it coming behind him when he was two-thirds of the way across the street. He glanced around. Then he made a flying leap which brought him behind a parked limousine. He had jumped just in time to save himself from being run over.

Fuming with anger, he whirled to face the driver. As he turned, the driver of the taxi swerved slightly to the left and abruptly jammed on his brakes. The street still was slippery from the recent thunder shower. And the taxi man's ingenious move caused the rear wheels of his taxi to skid violently round to the right and into O'Malley. The cab brought up against the back of the parked limousine with a jarring crash!

Chapter VIII

WARD BARRETT

IT WAS the luckiest thing in the world for O'Malley that he had whirled round. Already very much on the alert, he was given a fraction of a second before the impact came. In that instant of time he made a wild backward leap that carried him to the sidewalk just as the cab side-swiped the other car. To the startled passers-by it looked as though he had been squeezed from between the two by the impact, so narrowly did he escape being crushed.

Without stopping, he gathered trembling legs under him and dashed for the office building. Bystanders stared after him. But they hardly were given time to grasp what had happened before he was gone. The taxi driver had straightened his cab, pulled out from the curb and whisked around again, driving for Sixth Avenue, before anyone could attempt to stop him. His starboard running board was littered with glass from the broken rear window of the unfortunate limousine.

O'Malley raced into the lobby, found Barrett's name on the register there and made for a half-filled elevator. He waited in tense expectancy, for at this hour there were few people entering the building. But the elevator started at last and one by one the passengers got off until O'Malley was alone with the attendant. Evidently the pursuit was over for the moment.

Now that he was the only passenger, O'Malley appeared to wake up suddenly and remember his floor. The man let him off at Barrett's offices on the way down again. O'Malley's indignant rage had cooled to a steady, but very deep anger. The meaning of the attempt had come home to him. He could picture himself run over or crushed between the two cars and picture the remorseful driver lifting him into the cab with the intention, carefully expressed to the bystanders, of rushing him to the nearest hospital. And he could see, once they were in a safe place, the man stopping his cab, getting down and taking the letter from his helpless body. Then, probably he would have been tumbled out into the road. He promised himself that he would find and settle with that driver some day.

O'Malley inquired at the desk for Barrett. He was forced to tell the girl that he had an appointment before she even would send in his name. When she had done so, he cooled his heels and his temper in a chair for ten minutes. Then at last a boy came out from an inner office and beckoned to him. A moment later he was in the presence of the man he sought.

Barrett waved his visitor to a chair. "Sit down, Mr. O'Malley," he said.

O'Malley complied. For half a minute neither spoke. Barrett's veiled but penetrating glance embraced a good looking young fellow with dark reddish hair, gray eyes framed by dark lashes which made them seem lighter in color, a wide humorous mouth and a long, somewhat lanky figure. The mouth looked sensitive, almost too sensitive, he thought. But any weakness there was redeemed by the firm lean jaw and the blunt, stocky nose.

On his part, O'Malley was busy with a similar but much more difficult task. Unquestionably Ward Barrett was a fine looking man. He had been standing when the young Irishman entered and O'Malley had seen that he was tall and broad-shouldered, with a shapely, well set head and a strong, active figure. The face was smooth shaven and bronzed from the out-of-doors. But the man's thick, short hair was sprinkled generously with gray and there were lines from the corners of the eyes and about the mouth.

It was O'Malley who first broke the silence. "I hope Miss Hunt reached home safely?" he inquired.

Barrett, staring at his visitor from beneath lowered lids, smiled slightly, somewhat enigmatically it seemed to O'Malley. "She did, thanks to you," answered Barrett. "It seems I have a lot to thank you for." Barrett's voice was deep and pleasant. It sounded grave, too. But O'Malley seemed to catch an undertone of amusement in it which puzzled him. But he had too little vanity to let that worry him. He smiled in his turn.

"Afraid that's a bit exaggerated," he pointed out. "I made pretty much of a mess of it in that taxi. And your sister stood by like a—like a brick. I've brought you your letter," he added.

O'Malley's eyes were fixed on Barrett as he spoke. And he saw the man's eyebrows go up for an instant in swift sur-

prise. Barrett leaned forward a little. "Frankly," he said, "you surprise me. I never thought you would be permitted to bring it here!"

"No?" inquired O'Malley. "Well, I have." He was surprised himself. If Barrett felt that way, why had he not sent for the letter? Also, in view of what he had done for the man's sister, the remark sounded a little callous. Studying the other closely, he suddenly sensed the fact that Barrett, for some reason, had by no means accepted him at his face value.

"Before I give it to you, I must tell you that I have read it," he announced gravely.

Barrett eyed him, politely inscrutable. "Oh, have you?"

And now O'Malley was sure. Barrett either believed or suspected that O'Malley had not been the accidental passerby last night that he had claimed to be. The worst of it was that O'Malley really *was* in a false position. In view of his promise to Louise to investigate Barrett, he was no longer a casual, disinterested stranger.

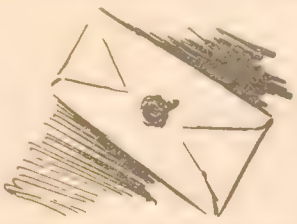
O'Malley nodded. "You see," he explained, watching Barrett closely, "there were four attempts to get that letter last night. Someone tried to get it from your sister. Then they searched us in the taxi, as she probably told you. When I got home my rooms had been ransacked. And in the night a man broke in and tried again. The last joker had found it and torn off the envelope before I woke up. He was the man who first attacked your sister. I chased him out and hid the letter again. But I read it this afternoon. Here it is, by the way."

He took the letter from his pocket and handed it across the desk to Barrett. The financier accepted and spread it open without comment other than a word of thanks. O'Malley watched him read it. Presently Barrett looked up. "Will you pardon me a minute?"

O'Malley bowed. Barrett pulled out a small drawer and drew from it a sheet of blank white paper. From a pocket wallet he took a crumpled half-sheet of note paper, spreading it flat on the desk before him. O'Malley saw that it contained a line or two of writing in pencil.

Glancing first at the pencilled lines and then at the other letter, Barrett began jotting down words on the blank sheet. O'Malley instantly divined that the letter *was* a cipher message and that the pencilled lines were the key to it. But he could not see what Barrett had written.

A slow flush had crept up and turned Barrett's face to a dusky red. He glanced at his guest with a faint smile and reaching forward to the match stand on his desk, struck a match. O'Malley realized that the man was watching him like a cat. Barrett applied the flame to the letter brought by the Irishman, to the key paper which he had taken from his wallet and finally to his notes. One by one, as he lit them, he laid the papers on a big bronze ashtray and watched them curl and crackle to ashes. Then he picked up a paper cutter and crushed the blackened remnants flat.



"Mr. O'Malley," he said, with the faintest note of irony in his voice, "I am deeply appreciative of your kindness in bringing that letter to me. As I thought, it was of greater importance to others than to me. But I am glad to have had the opportunity of reading it. Beyond that, I am very much more grateful to you for your courage in rescuing my sister last night and for the rarer quality of chivalry you showed when you found her, with entirely mistaken zeal, trying to burgle your apartment."

"Look here," said O'Malley uncomfortably, "please forget that, will you, Mr. Barrett? I made an awful mess of that taxi business. They took me completely by surprise. And I did rather less for Miss Hunt than any man would have done. But I *am* puzzled about that letter——"

A sort of frozen look settled over Barrett's features. "Excuse me, Mr. O'Malley," he said, "but that letter really would not interest you. In fact, quite the contrary. I am sorry you thought it necessary to read it. But I don't imagine you made much sense of it?"

His eyes were intent on O'Malley's face. But if he expected to catch an expression of veiled triumph there, he failed. "If I may advise you about a matter better understood by me than by you," he went on, "I would suggest that you forget it as soon as possible. It will be better for everybody concerned."

At so palpable a threat, O'Malley's innate independence reared its head. His mouth set in firm lines. He said nothing.

Barrett watched for a moment. Then the gravity of his expression faded to a comprehending smile. "I'm not trying to head you off on my account, Mr. O'Mal-

ley," he pointed out pleasantly. "I'm not trying to snub you, either. I owe you far too much for that. I'm simply telling you the truth. It *will* be better—far safer—for you if you forget it."

Barrett had touched a bell on his desk. O'Malley rose, shook hands and moved away as the boy appeared. At the door he turned. "Good-by, Mr. Barrett," he said. "We should meet again."

He glanced back as he spoke. But Barrett's answering bow and smile, the latter slightly amused, expressed neither alarm nor surprise. O'Malley went out feeling annoyed, baffled and, secretly, rather impressed.

Ward Barrett was going to prove a formidable opponent.

Chapter IX

THE FIRST VICTIM

WITH the passing of the summer storm the new washed Avenue lay cool and glittering under a smiling sky, bisected at regular intervals by gleaming shafts of orange light from the descending sun. The pavements, still warm from the midday heat, were drying rapidly. O'Malley swung round the corner and strode away northward, intent on his recent interview.

Barrett had made a strong impression on him. The man's personality was charming. It inspired both confidence and liking. There was great strength of purpose, firm control, behind the calm reserve. And yet——

O'Malley's train of thought diverged a little. He tried to imagine his own father, now dead many years, ruined and brought to suicide by a man like Chester; the thing done treacherously, too. And he felt, if only vicariously, the glow of anger and hatred such a knowledge would have kindled in his own breast. Not justified perhaps, but overwhelmingly human, such a motive for revenge!

Before his mental vision flashed the face of Claudia Hunt, disturbing the current of his thoughts and quickening his pulse. It seemed a face of tantalizing beauty, not so much because of delicate features and a clear, soft skin, but for a dainty dignity, a glamorous femininity, that breathed a flowerlike fastidiousness.

O'Malley was nearing the park now and close to the hotel in which he had first seen the girl. He wondered whether she would be there again tonight. Casting problems to the winds he entered the hotel and made his way to the dining-room. Of course she was not there. With the everyday, common sense side of him still feebly in evidence, he recognized that the chances against seeing her were about a million to one. But his veins already sang with the fever of love. Another side of him said that she ought to be there, because he wanted to see her. Perhaps she would come.

He dined slowly, eking out each dish as long as possible and sitting long over his coffee. People came and went. It grew dark in the street outside. The waiter hovered near him, wondering. But at last, when eight o'clock had come and passed, he paid his check and went home, feeling vaguely aggrieved against the hour, against the hotel, against the universe.

He found a telegram on his table and opened it at once. When he had read it his brows furrowed. It was an invitation out of town.

MY FATHER IS DEAD CAN YOU COME TO ME
LOUISE

O'Malley was shocked. Chester meant little to him. But the Irishman's imagination was vivid, and he pictured instantly Louise staggering and broken under such a blow. If Chester were dead, there could be little doubt that he had died by his own hand. Under such circumstances of horror, Louise would need somebody with her at once, not tomorrow or the next day. He collected a few necessities and dropped them into a bag. In a very few minutes he left the house again, hailed a taxi and was on his way to the station. He was fortunate enough to catch a train almost immediately.

During the journey his thoughts flitted here and there. He puzzled over the cause of Chester's death. He puzzled over the question of how this final tragedy would affect the problem of the robbery. And he sought to work out some comforting counsel that would be of help to his friend. His thoughts reverted to Barrett also. And it struck him that if Barrett, whom Louise still loved, had been responsible for her father's death, this was a tragedy indeed.

A station taxi took him to the house. The red-eyed maid who admitted him—after a cautious inspection through the door—told him that he would find Miss Chester in her sitting room. She had been expecting him for some time.

As he mounted the stairs, Bates, the butler, came hurrying through the hall below

him, from the back of the house. O'Malley stared down at the man in surprise. He was ghastly pale. He walked with his head held stiffly erect, as though he were in a trance. And his hands were moving aimlessly, in a series of strange spasmodic gestures. He did not notice O'Malley on the stairs and the latter made no effort to attract his attention. He merely stored away in his mind a mental note of the man's appearance for future reference and hurried on upward to the familiar, bright little sitting-room.

In a moment he saw her, crouched on the wide cretoned and cushioned window seat, watching him. Pity swept over O'Malley in a flood. He went quickly toward her, holding out his hands. "Louise! You poor girl! What can I do to help you?"

She sat staring up at him vaguely. She put out her hand in an aimless way and touched his. "Is it you, Terry?" she murmured. "I thought you would come."

In swift alarm he sat down beside her. He took one of her hands and slipped an arm about her, drawing her close. "Louise!" he whispered, "tell me about it."

Louise glanced up at him sideways, resting quietly against him as though unaware that he held her. She pointed toward the side of the room. "He's in there, Terry," she answered, tonelessly. "He's got blood on his face and on his mouth. He lies so still! He won't ever move again. I ran in and found him, you see. His face was wet and sticky. I got it on my hands." She held them out and stared at them.

With rising apprehension, O'Malley shook her gently. "Then you wired for me?" he prompted.

"Yes. They took me away. Bates, I think. My aunt was screaming. I telephoned the telegram to you. A policeman came and asked me questions. He said—my father is dead—" A tremor shook her for an instant and she lapsed into silence.

"Louise!" he cried. "I'm desperately sorry. Isn't there *anything* I can do?"

The vibrant pity in his voice seemed to pierce the numb lethargy into which she had fallen. A violent tremor ran through her body. She was shaken by an uncontrollable shuddering that grew more and more acute. And after a moment she turned to him with a sudden sharp wail of anguish and buried her face against his shoulder. His heart aching with compassion, O'Malley held her so.

After a time her surcharged emotions gradually began to exhaust themselves. The storm of choking sobs abated slowly. Her shaking figure grew quieter in his arms. At last she began to speak, her voice broken by sobs and muffled against his shoulder.

"Oh, Terry, what shall I *do?* He's dead! He killed himself! What is money anyway? Oh, Terry, I can hardly believe he did it. It's like some horrible nightmare——"

"Is it certain that he did do it?" he asked her gently.

"Oh, yes. I almost saw him! It was right after dinner!"

"Will you tell me all about it, Louise?" he asked clumsily.

"I'll try to, Terry," she answered faintly, "but it's all such a ghastly, needless tragedy!"

"Would you rather not talk about it?"

"Oh, no. I think it will help if I tell you," she cried. "I'd rather tell you. Perhaps you can explain it. I can't see why he did it—" She broke off and caught her trembling lower lip between white teeth. O'Malley squeezed her hand in silence.

"I'll have to tell you everything, Terry, if you don't mind," she went on at last. "You see, it really began long ago. Mr. Schenk is older than I am a good deal. But he is much younger than my father and really belongs, I suppose, to my generation. And—he always wanted me. For years he badgered me to marry him, and he still asks me every chance he gets.

"When this happened—this robbery—my father seemed to think that only Schenk could save him. Schenk refused when he was here on Sunday. At least, he said he couldn't. And yesterday my father begged me to go into town and plead with him. He told me that his fate rested with me. He said that Schenk could help him easily if he wanted to.

"I think he hinted, when he was here, that he would help father if I married him. Of course, my father evaded that. But yesterday he was desperate. He tried to persuade me to marry the man. You know Schenk's horrible reputation, Terry. When I refused my father went all to pieces, so I finally consented to ask Schenk to help him. But, of course, I would not promise to marry him. I *couldn't* make

such a sacrifice as that just for money, could I, Terry? Nobody ought to expect that, should they?"

"I should say not!" exploded O'Malley.

"Well, I went, as you know, for you came into town with me. I went to his office and asked for him. It wasn't very pleasant. Two girls there stared and snickered. But I asked for an interview. He kept me waiting for a while and then sent for me.

"The mere sight of him, sitting behind his desk and staring at me with that impassive glare of his sickened me. But I got through my petition somehow. And what do you think he said?"

O'Malley shook his head.

"He said, 'My dear Louise'—he's never called me by my first name. I never let him. 'My dear Louise, I'll settle half a million on you as a wedding present, if you like. And you can do what you like with it.' He said it perfectly calmly, too."

O'Malley uttered a strangled exclamation.

"I tried to be as calm as he was. I thanked him for the honor, hating him. But I told him that that was out of the question, as I did not care for him. I asked him again whether, for old friendship's sake, he would help father.

"He stared at me for a moment and then reached out and touched a bell. 'My dear Miss Chester,' he said this time, 'you go back and tell your father that I'll throw no good money after bad. Good day to you!'"

O'Malley pressed her hand gently. "Go on, Louise," he told her, his voice restrained and quiet—dangerously so.

"I came home at once and told my father what he had said. Father didn't exactly reproach me, but he turned deathly white and his face set in the most desperate way. I tried to comfort him, tried to tell him that money didn't matter. I even promised to go again. But he pushed me away from him and went to his room. That was before dinner.

"He came down to dinner and was almost himself again. I supposed that he had thought of some other way out of his difficulties and I didn't like to question him. I felt as though it were my fault somehow, although I knew it wasn't. Oh, Terry, I never dreamed! He must have made up his mind before dinner. As soon as I had gone into the library he went to his study. I heard the shot, but I thought it was something heavy that had fallen. I ran in to see. And he lay there!"

"What a ghastly experience, Louise! I'm sorrier than I can tell that it has happened. But as for you, it's no more your fault than it is mine. You know that as well as I do. I'm going to stay here for a day or two and help you through the worst of it, if you'll let me. There'll be an inquest, of course. But I imagine they'll let me answer most of the questions for you. As for Schenk, that can go until later. Now will you go to bed and try to get some sleep?"

O'Malley did not add that it only needed this story of Schenk's reception of her to stiffen his half-formed resolve into a rigid determination to discover Schenk's part in the robbery if it took him a year. O'Malley knew that Schenk had had a hand in the robbery. And with that and this, he had been indirectly, although perhaps not legally, responsible for Chester's suicide.

But Louise had more to tell him. "Wait, Terry," she cried as he rose to leave her. "I couldn't possibly go to sleep. Later I'll try. But there's something else I must tell you. It hurts. I didn't give you everything, this afternoon. I told you that it was rumored that my father was one of the men who ruined Mr. Barrett, senior. That wasn't quite true, nor was it quite all. Father had admitted to me that he and two other men were in a big deal with Mr. Barrett. At the last moment they saw the chance to make a big fortune each by cheating him. They 'froze him out' in some way, father said, and he shot himself. So—if this is revenge—it is terribly just—in a way! Oh, Terry, I am wicked to speak so of my own father."

O'Malley nodded slowly, as the vista of crime and long delayed revenge shaped itself down the years before his imagination. "So it was true, Louise? And you think that Barrett was behind this!"

She turned to him at that, gripped his hand fiercely. "I don't know! How can I tell? I *can't* believe—and yet—what shall I do, Terry?" she gasped. "Ward Barrett knew my father had that money, or at least father said so. Probably he knew what the loss of it would mean!"

O'Malley stared at her for an instant. "Do?" he said quietly. "You do nothing at all. Leave that part of it to me, will you, Louise? And tell me something else. What became of the other two men who ruined Barrett's father?"

"They made a lot of money, all three of them, Terry. It was the beginning of success for them all."

"Who were the others, Louise?"

She gazed at him, a dawning wonder widening her wet eyes. "Terry! That's the strangest part of it all!" she cried. "One of them was a man named Bindless. I believe he's retired now and living like a miser in his great house. But the other was—Mr. Schenk!"

O'Malley stared at her in amazement. "You mean *this* Schenk?"

Louise Chester nodded slowly, her eyes questioning. "Yes! The man I went to see this afternoon!"

Chapter X

JULIAN TAKES A HAND

AFTER breakfast next morning O'Malley got in touch with the local police and through them with the county coroner. In view of the weight of evidence to show that Chester had died by his own hand, the coroner had decided to hold the inquest at once. Chester had a bullet wound in the roof of his mouth, the bullet having entered his brain. Such a wound could be only self-inflicted.

By eleven o'clock O'Malley had arranged most of the details concerning the inquest and had interviewed half a dozen reporters. He found those gentlemen willing to meet him halfway. In return for telling them what he knew they undertook to leave the women of the household in peace, which was what O'Malley wanted. In any case, the details of the suicide were less interesting than the business crisis which led up to it. And for that the reporters had other sources of information. So they did not trouble him very much.

Early in the afternoon, O'Malley had an interview with the coroner, who had known Chester personally. In view of the obvious nature of the case, that gentleman was able to make the part played by the two women at the inquest a mercifully short one.

The verdict was, "Suicide while temporarily of unsound mind."

Early next morning O'Malley took a flying trip to New York. He had done some hard thinking during the night. A word or two with the local police sergeant who had interviewed him on Monday morning in connection with the robbery had convinced him that the police had made no progress toward clearing up that mystery. Neither Chester nor his daughter had mentioned Chester's suspicions of Barrett, and there was no one else apparently even under suspicion. The detective from the New York police department who had been put on the case, had disappeared. It was probable that he was bending all his energies to locating the securities in New York, when at attempt should be made to dispose of them.

O'Malley felt convinced that he held clues to the robbery. He was somewhat suspicious of Barrett and highly suspicious of Schenk. But suspicion was not evidence. He had little enough to go on. It seemed probable that, if he took his suspicions of two such prominent men to the police, he would be laughed at.

On the other hand, he held all the threads there were, for he alone knew that Barrett was mixed up with that mysterious and questionable letter. He had a feeling, probably due to his own presence at the robbery so shortly before, that letter and robbery were not unconnected.

There was another reason for keeping his suspicions of Barrett, at least, to himself. The man had made a favorable impression on him. Louise believed in Barrett. And there was Claudia!

Among a wide circle of friends O'Malley numbered a police lieutenant. As soon as he reached the Pennsylvania station he got this man on the telephone. Half an hour later they were talking together at headquarters.

"Look here, Jim," began O'Malley after a preliminary greeting, "I want some information and I want it kept dark for the present. Can you fix it for me?"

"What is it?" inquired Lieutenant Brady cautiously.

"I want a code message deciphered. But I want to keep the result to myself. Otherwise, there's nothing doing."

Brady studied him doubtfully. "Any reason to think the message is of a criminal nature?" he inquired, grinning.

O'Malley thought for a moment. "I have no evidence to make me think so," he replied.

"Say," laughed the lieutenant, "what's the idea of splitting hairs with me? Better turn it over to the police, O'Malley."

"That's just what I won't do. At least, not yet. I'm going to investigate it myself. I have the best of reasons."

He shook his head. "Look here, Jim, if you'll help me with it, I'll let you in on

it the minute I can. But I want your promise and that of the man who deciphers it, that the message is kept secret until I give the word. Otherwise, I'll keep it myself."

Over the lieutenant's face spread an expression of intense disgust. "Oh, you amachure sleuths!" he growled. "But all right, I'll help you. And if you get yourself bumped off, don't blame me!"

On a sheet of paper with the official letterhead Lieutenant Brady scribbled a note and handed it to O'Malley.

Kindly decode any letter or message brought to you by the bearer, Mr. Terrance O'Malley. Charge it to Mr. O'Malley. Anything conncctcd with the letter or message is to be entirely confidential.

"Take that up to this address and he'll fix it up for you. You'll find him there until noon. You can catch him now if you get a move on; it's only eleven."

The address was on the East Side and up in O'Malley's vicinity. He thanked the lieutenant and hurried out of police headquarters.

O'Malley half-expected to find the Julius Schmidt to whom Brady had directed him a little wizened old student. But when he had entered one of a tumbledown block of small red brick houses and climbed two malodorous flights of stairs, he found himself in the presence of a totally different type. The door had been opened to his knock by a slovenly little girl, who ushered him into the stuffy front room. Schmidt sat in a huge wheel chair with a table across his lap. He was almost incredibly fat. His head was totally bald. Both legs were missing, one having been cut off at the hip, the other at the knee. The enormous face he turned toward his visitor was embedded in a cushion of chins which rested on his bulging person.

"Mr. Julius Schmidt?" inquired O'Malley.

A pair of small and watery blue eyes were turned on him. "Dot's me," the man wheezed. "You got pusiness mit?"

O'Malley saw that the hand of his huge host had stolen to his side pocket. Beneath the cloth he could see the bulge of the fat fingers as they closed over something. And the front of the pocket stuck out suspiciously. In swift enlightenment, O'Malley wondered how many clever and vindictive criminals this mountain of flesh had helped to punish.

"Lieutenant Brady sent me up here," he explained with a smile. "Don't shoot, Mr. Schmidt."

The watery eyes regarded him without expression.

O'Malley extended his note from police headquarters. The big man took it and read it slowly, then stowed it away in a little drawer in his table. A slow smile creased his features until his eyes were almost hidden. "You got anodder leedle buzzle, hein? Vell, led me see id!" He had withdrawn his hand from his pocket and was rubbing it over the other in slow, reptilian satisfaction.

"You understand," O'Malley told him, as he handed over his copy of the letter to Ward Barrett, "that the contents of this letter are entirely confidential between you and me? You are to mention it to no one, not even Brady?"

Schmidt nodded. "I haf read der leutnant's letter!"

The pale blue eyes traveled slowly down the message. Then Schmidt laid it down before him and looked up. "Dis is nod der original. Vere is dot?" he inquired softly.

"Never mind about that," returned O'Malley. "That's the message I want deciphered. And it's all there. Can you do it?"

Schmidt stared at the message again. "Yes, id is all dere—except der key!" he wheezed. "Bedder leave it mit. Und call tomorrow odder der next day, hein? I see vot I gan do."

"What are your charges, Mr. Schmidt?" inquired O'Malley, stifling a desire to laugh.

The big man turned his head away. "If I gan read id, fife tollars. Oddervise, nodding!"

O'Malley left him with the letter.

It was a good deal of a scramble getting back to the Chester home in time for the funeral. But O'Malley made it. And he found time to snatch a little lunch on the way to the station.

Louise begged O'Malley to remain the night following the funeral, and he readily agreed. But it was evident that her friends were eminently capable of seeing her through the trying first few days. O'-

Malley, not being in any way related to the family, was in a more or less false position now that the household had settled down. He decided to return to town the next morning.

So their ways parted for a while. Louise stayed at her somber home to pick up the threads of her life again as best she could. O'Malley found himself back in New York and very much at a loss as to what to do next. He went straight back to his rooms, filled and lit the famous meerschaum and sat down to think.

Presently, from a welter of facts and surmises, emerged a logical conclusion. There were only two persons even remotely connected with the robbery, so far as he knew at present. Chester had suspected Barrett of having had something to do with it. O'Malley suspected Schenk. But there was no earthly motive to connect Schenk with robbing a safe. While in the case of Barrett there was a possible if not a probable motive, revenge. And there was that mysterious letter to show that Barrett's life contained something distinctly suspicious at least.

Now then, reasoned O'Malley, if Barrett had had something to do with the robbery, the motive had been one of revenge for that long past treachery against his father. For Barrett was too wealthy and too prominent to steal from a safe for the sake of the money. But Chester had not been alone in that treachery. There had been two others, according to Louise. One of these was a man named Bindless; the other was Schenk. And *if* Barrett had robbed for revenge, he surely would not stop at Chester. He would revenge himself on the others, also. Sooner or later he would attack Bindless or Schenk or both.

Any disaster to either of these men would therefore indicate that the Barrett theory was correct. But there would be only one way to connect Barrett with such an attack. That would be to be present when the attack took place, whether it be an assault or a robbery. Barrett would be unlikely to assign such a thing to someone else, for fear of blackmail afterward. He would probably do it himself if he did it at all. And he would surely do it at night. Therefore, watch Barrett, and at night, for he could not very well watch both the others.

He went out for a walk, had lunch and went downtown to attend to some of his own affairs. He dined early that night and the coming of darkness found him strolling up and down the far side of Riverside Drive, opposite the apartment house where Barrett lived.

It was still twilight when he was lucky enough to see Barrett drive up in a taxi and descend across the street from him. He watched the tall figure stride into the lobby and disappear. And he waited with a steadily increasing hope that if that figure emerged again it would lead him to something interesting.

He waited an hour or two, drawing closer to the apartment house as the darkness deepened. And at last his vigil was rewarded by a familiar figure, though it was neither Miss Hunt nor Barrett.

A man came out of the apartment house and stood still on the sidewalk for a moment or two, glancing to left and right and out toward the river. O'Malley recognized him as the young man who had dined

with Miss Hunt in the hotel that night. He stood and watched him for a moment or two in idle curiosity. Then he started and stared. The young fellow, whom, O'Malley remembered, Claudia Hunt had called Julian, had been standing near the curb pulling on a pair of light tan gloves. He completed his task and then made an abrupt gesture in O'Malley's direction. It was a quick turn of the head and movement of the hand, indicating that he wanted O'Malley to accompany him or join him, farther along.

O'Malley was standing half-concealed by a tree. There was no street lamp just there. And although at first he thought the gesture had been meant for him, an instant's reflection convinced him that Julian could not have seen him after emerging from the lighted hall. Nor would the young fellow have signalled to him in that informal manner, if he had seen him.

The Irishman looked swiftly around him. A little in front of him a man just had risen from a bench and had started to walk in the direction indicated by Julian. O'Malley saw, turned and started along the sidewalk in the same direction. His curiosity aroused by these elaborate maneuvers, O'Malley strolled along that way also, taking a middle course between the

two, but walking more slowly than either.

They drew ahead of him slowly, the man from the bench veering to the right, so that his path and that of Julian converged. O'Malley further slackened his pace. And in a moment the man crossed in front of him and stepped to the other sidewalk, with Julian a little ahead of him.

They progressed in this way until Julian reached a corner, with O'Malley bringing up the rear. Julian turned to his right and disappeared along the side street. The man behind him did the same. And in a moment O'Malley reached the corner, crossed over and turned west, on the other side of the street from them. He strolled along for a little way and stopped, apparently trying to locate a house number. A brief glance behind him disclosed the fact that Julian and the stranger were in low-voiced conversation just across the street.

O'Malley walked on slowly, scanning each house as he came to it. In a moment, out of the tail of his eye, he saw that Julian had turned back toward Riverside Drive and was in the act of hailing a taxi. The other man was walking rapidly toward O'Malley, but on the other side of the street.

Timing his walk so that the would reach the next corner ahead of the fellow, O'Malley stepped out briskly in the same direction. He reached the corner, turned sharply to the right and crossed the street, just as this man to whom Julian had signalled came under the light of the corner arc lamp.

Evidently he had not noticed O'Malley, for he passed by without glancing at the Irishman. But the latter was sufficiently startled to turn his head away after a single glimpse. It was the hatless man, the man with the bruise on his cheek who had run out of Barrett's office building in pursuit of the girl and had later attacked O'Malley. There was one change in his appearance, aside from the fact that he now wore a soft hat. The bruise O'Malley had noticed was now a black eye in full bloom!

Chapter XI

THE HOUSE OF BINDLESS

THE same dowdy little girl ushered him into the presence of the cipher expert, next morning. O'Malley gave Schmidt a pleasant good morning and stood eyeing him inquiringly. For Schmidt had turned his head as he entered and was looking him over with his embedded little eyes.

"Goot morning," said the big man at last. "You haf gome about der ledder?"

"Naturally," returned O'Malley in a crisp tone. He was growing a little restive under the slow inspection.

"*Ach*, zo?" Schmidt lapsed into silence again.

"Any luck with it?" inquired O'Malley. "Could you make any sense of it?"

Schmidt nodded. "Dot vas easy, Mr. O'Malley. Bud to egsplain der message—would be more deeficuld, hein?"

O'Malley stepped closer. "What do you mean?" he asked.

The mountainous Schmidt drew the copy and an additional sheet of paper from a drawer, then looked up again.

"I show you," he wheezed. "Id vas easy—for me."

He spread the papers out before him. O'Malley leaned closer and saw that Schmidt had again copied the message in a beautiful copper plate handwriting. But in this second copy some of the letters were underlined. The new version read,

Only one question remains awaiting my approval and my subscription. Evans wants more equity or different interests affected between you. Attack unheard of quotations Bessemer alliance. On bad debts no allowances. Let Baker's margin stand. Script enhances eastern issues, but Evans prefers same offer until seeing you. Good service to Baker makes Evans's attacks unhealthy, encouraging activity should not Asphalt eventually quieten. But feel new activity precludes security.

"You see," explained Schmidt, pointing with an enormous, ink stained finger, "ve haf der last ledder of der first vord to throw us off der track. But after, all is blain. Id is der first ledder of der second vord, der second of der third vord, der third ledder of der fourth vord, der first of der fifth, und so on. You see?"

O'Malley stared down at the paper. "But how in the world did you work it out?" he demanded.

"Dot," chuckled Schmidt, "is *my* pusiness. But I vill egsplain a leedle. All trough der message dere are vords mit H in dem, onligely vords, hein? Dere are: 'unheard of,' 'enhances' and 'unhealthy,' see? Und h is always der third ledder. Dot is a start. Ve take der third ledder of each vord und try dot.

"Dot does not help us mooch," Schmidt wheezed on, "so, we dry someding else. Dere is dree dimes dot name Evans. Dere

is 'equidy,' an onlikely vord. Dere is 'awaiting,' a most onlikely vord to be used. Und so it goes. Der rest is—choost time."

"I see," exclaimed O'Malley. "Then after that first word it is the first, second and third letter in rotation, over and over again. But what is the message? Have you written that off, too?"

The big man eyed him. "Subbose," he suggested, "you dake a pencil und paper und write dem down as I read dem, der underlined ledders, hein?"

O'Malley nodded, drew a chair up to the table and accepted the pad and pencil offered him. Schmidt picked up the copy he had made and held it before him. As he read the letters O'Malley wrote them down:

Y o u m a y p a y b e a r e r f i f t y t h o u s a n d d o l l a r s c h e s t e r m o n e y o r t a k e t h e c o n s e q u e n c e s .

"Dot is all," concluded Schmidt softly.

O'Malley stared down at his own writing, And with rising excitement he read off the buried message.

You may pay bearer fifty thousand dollars Chester money or take the consequences.

"Well, I'll be damned!" he exclaimed. He stared down at the paper for a moment longer. Then he glanced up at Schmidt. The German had dropped his copy of the letter and the Irishman saw, peering over the edge of the table, the muzzle of a large revolver which Schmidt held steadily.

The hair lifted a little at the back of his neck. He was looking straight into the muzzle. He leaned back in his seat, his eyes veiled.

"What's the idea of the gun?" he inquired pleasantly.

Schmidt stared at him. Then he slowly stowed the revolver away in his pocket while his huge face creased in a smile. But he still held the revolver, although it was in his pocket.

"Vell," observed Schmidt, "I haf heard of der Chester robbery. I dink dis ledder you pring me is—incriminating, no?"

"I agree with you," laughed O'Malley, "but it wasn't sent to me! And I have your word and Brady's that this will remain confidential between us."

"Dot is vy," nodded Schmidt, "I did not haf der bolice here ven you game dis morning. But it is my duty to tell dem." He touched his chest. "I mineself, am bolice official, you see?"

O'Malley leaned back in his chair and laughed again. "Exactly," he replied. "I congratulate you. But you are also a man of your word. There is more to this case than you can understand. And has it occurred to you that I, too, may be connected with the police? Has it occurred to you that there may be an excellent reason for keeping this letter confidential, *for the present?*"

O'Malley saw that Schmidt seemed impressed and uncertain. So he added a final touch to his specious argument. "Don't let it worry you, Schmidt. For this letter and the translation of it will be in Brady's hands before ten days are up. Be sure of that. It's merely a necessary and wise delay."

"Very goot," replied Schmidt. "I say noddings to nobody."

"That's the idea," said O'Malley heartily. "And here's your five. I'm much obliged to you for a smart bit of work. But Brady told me I could rely on you."

Schmidt let go of the revolver in his pocket and accepted the money and the compliment. In a moment or two, O'Malley found himself out in the street again. He had been fighting with all that was in him of self-control and cunning, to keep that letter from the police. Why?

The motive was not long in presenting itself. Ward Barrett was a thief. There could be little doubt of that now. For everything pointed that way. Indirectly, he was a murderer. But he was Claudia Hunt's half-brother. And with Claudia Hunt, dainty and alluring, proud and plucky and self-reliant, he, O'Malley, had fallen in love.

And there was Louise. She loved the man still. She believed in him, even against her father's expressed conviction that Barrett had had a hand in robbing him. Chester's intuitive conviction had been correct. The letter incriminated Barrett, for it had been addressed to him. But how lucky that O'Malley had omitted his name from the copy he had made of the letter!

But what now? To warn Barrett would be to betray Louise, for the stolen money now was hers. To betray Barrett to the police—! In imagination he could see Claudia Hunt's sweet face in the courtroom, blanched and drawn with an agony of suffering and shame, as she listened to the weaving of the net about her brother.

With this, he came to a definite decision. Like Schmidt, he would say "noddings to nobody" for the time being. In spite of the letter, including the letter, the evidence against Barrett was purely circumstantial and deductive.

In ten days he would turn the letter over to Brady. In the meantime he would watch Barrett. There might be some other solution to the mystery. If Barrett did not move against either Bindless or Schenk it would be a point in his favor, although a weak one. For he would be unlikely to move against either of the others just yet, even if he had robbed Chester.

As soon as he found himself back in his rooms, O'Malley sat down with the telephone book to look up two addresses. That of Schenk he found without difficulty. His town house was in the East Seventies. And judging by the single digit it was just off Fifth Avenue. Bindless was not in the telephone book.

O'Malley called up a reporter friend on an evening paper and got himself switched through to the newspaper's morgue. After a few moments of waiting, a girl gave him the address he wanted. Bindless lived in a narrow, unpretentious house on Amsterdam Avenue, not half a dozen blocks from Barrett's apartment house.

Now began for the Irishman days and nights of anxious waiting. He kept watch until far into the small hours for three successive nights before Barrett's apartment house. But aside from the fact that Barrett kept late hours, he learned nothing.

Somewhat to his surprise he had not heard a word from either Claudia Hunt or Barrett. He had rather expected some word from one of them, after what Barrett had said about thanking him.

But one night, about a week after Chester's death, he found himself suddenly in the thick of the mystery again. He had taken up his post as usual and had seen Barrett come home about eleven. Then the time had passed slowly and without incident until two o'clock. O'Malley was just about ready to make for home again when he saw the front door of the apartment house open and a man came out. There was no attendant in sight in the hall.

The Irishman was alert at once, for the man was tall and commanding looking. In a moment he came into the light before the entrance. He looked right and left, then glanced up at the sky.

O'Malley whistled under his breath. The man was Barrett. Closer inspection showed him that the financier wore a dark spring overcoat and a soft hat. But he was given no time for surmise nor for closer inspection. Thrusting his hands in his pockets, Barrett turned on his heel and started off up Riverside Drive at a pace that carried him rapidly away from where O'Malley stood. And after waiting a moment to give him a start, O'Malley set off in pursuit.

Barrett walked swiftly north for three blocks and then turned east. O'Malley quickened his pace and presently swung round the corner into the crosstown street. Then he stopped abruptly. Barrett had disappeared as though the earth had swallowed him.

A moment later he was aware of a dark figure looming close to him on the sidewalk. The light from the corner arc lamp shone on his face. It was Ward Barrett. And he was smiling. "Well," he observed, "it's the young man who rescued my letter. You take the air late, Mr. O'Malley!" he added dryly.

O'Malley stared. "The pot and the kettle," he murmured.

Barrett laughed gently. "Quite right, Mr. O'Malley. But I'm afraid we shall have rain. Perhaps you had best get under cover."

"You think so? It seems a fine night to me," returned O'Malley, "but then, I don't mind getting wet."

"But perhaps you are in a hurry?" insisted Barrett grimly.

"Not at all," replied O'Malley, "but please don't let me detain you. I am walking east."

"Thank you," came the dry response. "I shall go north."

O'Malley turned on his heel and strode away eastward. When he looked back, Barrett just was disappearing up Riverside Drive. He had kept his word.

A wild surmise came into O'Malley's mind. Bindless lived on Amsterdam Avenue to the north and east. Barrett had been, still was, going in that direction. Was he making for Bindless's house? On

a sudden impulse the amateur detective broke into a rapid walk, almost a run. He covered three blocks, reached Amsterdam Avenue and turned north. He hurried along, glancing at the house numbers. In a moment he came to the house where Bindless lived. It was set back from the street a little and had the usual steps up to the front door, with the area and the basement entrance beneath.

O'Malley bolted across the street and slipped down into the shadow of another basement entrance there. He waited in silence, listening intently but not daring to look out. A moment or two later his heart leaped with eager excitement. Someone was coming along the street!

The sound of steps grew clearer and clearer in the quiet street. Suddenly they slowed and stopped. O'Malley stirred, raising his head until he could see over the edge of the stone railing.

Across the street stood a dark figure, scanning its length to left and right. For an instant the newcomer stood motionless. Then he turned and darted noiselessly into the shadow beneath the steps of the house opposite. And that house, O'Malley knew, belonged to Bindless, the retired and lonely miser. The man who had entered it undoubtedly was Barrett!

The Irishman waited, minute after minute. But there came no sound to his straining ears. And presently, with a grim smile to camouflage his distressful thoughts, he stepped from his place of concealment and ran lightly across the street. He scanned the little courtyard closely for a moment, saw that it was empty and stepped down into the shadow there. Another forward step and a void of darkness lay before him. The iron grill and the solid door which should guard the entrance stood open.

Just as O'Malley had run out into the open street, a third figure rounded the distant corner and darted into a place of concealment a little way down the block. And as the Irishman ventured forward and disappeared in the areaway of the house of Bindless, this third figure appeared in the street again and set out at a rolling gait for the corner from which it had come.

Chapter XII

THE SECOND VICTIM

STANDING alone now in the silent gloomy areaway at a little after two in the morning, O'Malley had need of both persistence and courage to venture into the darkness ahead. Ward Barrett had passed in there a moment before. It scarcely was possible that he had entered so secretly on any legitimate or peaceful errand, and Barrett was no mean antagonist, to be followed into the unknown with impunity. But what was he doing in there? O'Malley wanted to know.

With a faint grin twitching the corners of his mouth, he stretched out his hands before him and stepped forward into the black void of the doorway.

After a moment of fumbling his tentative fingers guided him to the right through another unguarded doorway. Mysterious, muffling darkness had closed over him now, smothering his perceptions like an impalpable sensory avalanche. He could hear the steady pound of his own heart, so still was the house above and the sleeping city beyond. He could hear nothing else.

Nerves tingling and fingers cautiously outspread, he took another careful step. The feel of the floor beneath his feet told him that he now trod upon bare boards. He advanced again and halted abruptly, warned by an indefinable sixth sense of the close proximity of some inanimate object. He brought his outstretched hands together. They closed on either side of a door, traced it toward his face and found the edge of it within a bare inch of his nose. With the perversity of the inanimate it had been so placed as to slip between his searching hands without touching them.

Thanking his stars that he had not crashed into it and so warned the man ahead of him, O'Malley felt his way to one side of it and found the doorway. At the same moment his slowly advancing foot bumped hollowly against a step.

He stopped to consider. He must be standing at the foot of the basement stairs which led to the first floor. He stared upward, straining to catch a glimmer of light. After an instant it seemed to him that the oblong of the stairway opening above was very faintly outlined against a background darker by contrast. There was a light up there somewhere.

He crept slowly and carefully up the steps ahead of him, applying his weight so gradually to each tread and stepping

so near the wall that he managed to avoid any sudden creak and to advance almost without a sound. After a few moments of slow climbing he was aware that his head had risen above the level of the floor above. To his left his fingers lost the flat wooden rail of the stair well and encountered the pillars of a horizontal railing. He gripped this rail and softly mounted the last two steps. Another step and he stood on carpet with a thick, deep pile.

To his right, his fingers told him, extended the side wall of the house. With one hand on the newel post at the end of the rail, he turned to the left and advanced a step. A rising, lengthening line of white light puzzled him for an instant. But another forward pace explained it. He was in a wide, unlighted hall. Along the other side of this and toward the front of the house a door stood ajar. The room beyond that door contained a light.

He stood motionless, listening. Not a sound came from the lighted room, nor from anywhere in the house. He stared about him. His eyes now were thoroughly accustomed to the darkness.

He had neither revolver nor torch. And the conviction smote him suddenly that following the intruder into the house, unprepared as he was, had been foolhardy to a degree.

Not that such a conviction deterred him. If the man ahead were Barrett, bent on some felonious errand similar to the robbery of Chester's safe, O'Malley wanted to know it. He must settle the question of Barrett's guilt once and for all. If he had a gun in his hand and a squad of police at his back, he would have deprived himself of three-quarters of the zest he now felt in the adventure, for that was his nature.

He crept along the railing toward the front of the hall, with his eyes on the line of light ahead. And he had taken only three short strides when his foot and then his shin came into contact with a low chest which stood along the railing of the basement stairs. Not only had his shoe, striking the chest, made a sound clearly audible in that stillness, but the pain of the blow brought him forward and down, so that both palms thumped on the top of the chest. The hall positively reverberated for an instant with the noise he had made.

Grinning with pain and consternation, O'Malley recovered his footing and waited, eyes searching the darker confines of the hall, his ears strained to catch an answering movement.

He could detect no movement, hear no sound. Still he waited. After a moment it seemed to him that he could distinguish the faint vibration of cautious footsteps somewhere on the same floor with him. But after a very short time the slight vibration ceased altogether. Once more the house seemed utterly deserted.

Turning his attention back to the door of the lighted room, O'Malley advanced toward it on tiptoe, pausing at every step to listen and stare about him. Across the hall he crept, on silent feet, bearing diagonally toward the front. As he neared the lighted slit where the door stood ajar, the waxing light enabled him to see and avoid a chair which lay in wait for him. And he touched the door jamb at last, without sound and without further alarm.

This door opened outward into the hall. The hinges were on the far side and the knob nearest him, so that he could see into the room at once from where he stood. But the opening showed him only an expanse of lateral wall to the left as one entered. The room must open out to the right. And that part of it was hidden from him by the door itself.

He laid cautious fingers on the edge of

the door, listened intently and then moved it wider. More and more of one side of the room came into view. He saw a picture, then a curtained doorway, presumably leading into another room in front of this one, and finally the corner of the lateral wall and the edge of a window in the far wall. Now the door was wide. It had opened on well oiled hinges and had made no sound. With infinite caution O'Malley advanced, gaining a wider view each instant, until at last he stood in the doorway and the entire room, apparently a library or study, was in sight.

A single electric globe in the table lamp provided the only light when O'Malley entered. It showed him a fireplace on the far side of the room, with broad oak panels on either side of it. One of these panels stood open, swung out into the room as though on hinges. In the darker space behind it the light glinted on metal. It was an open safe, the door of which caught the light. The interior was in the wildest confusion. On the floor near the panel lay papers and torn envelopes where they had been dropped carelessly.

A comfortable looking swivel chair was pulled up to the table on the side of it nearest the door. And in the chair sat a man, leaning forward, his head on his folded arms and fast asleep. His back was turned toward the Irishman and for a single instant O'Malley mistook him for the man who had preceded him into the house. A second glance showed him his mistake. This man wore a smoking jacket with a velvet collar. He was hatless and the lamplight glinted on the sparse white hair at the back of his head.

O'Malley stood hesitating in the doorway. Then he cast a rapid glance about the darkened hall behind him and advanced a step into the silent room, half-expecting to walk into some sort of an ambush. He moved and the figure at the table moved also. The man sagged lower in his chair. One of his arms slipped from the edge of the table and fell to his lap. O'Malley froze where he stood.

The Irishman had been wondering whether the sleeper was not Bindless, the lonely miser. Now another startling conjecture tensed his mind, like the clangor of a sudden alarm. There had been something grotesque, something indefinably horrible about that limp subsidence. And surely so abrupt a movement should have waked him or caused him at least to stir in his sleep.

The truth came home to O'Malley like a blow. He darted forward to the table. The man lay with his head twisted sideways and resting on one arm. The sunken eyes were closed, the wizened face ashen. But from the half-open mouth a stream of bright red blood had gushed. A few slow drops still trickled down to add to the spreading crimson pool in which the man's sleeve lay soaking.

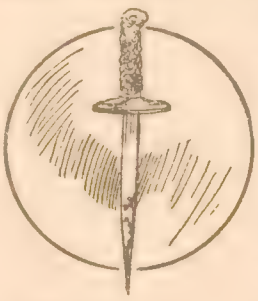
With an involuntary shudder, O'Malley saw the light glitter on a tiny rivulet which had spread beneath the lax, bony fingers out onto the polished table beyond.

Chapter XIII

THE NIBBLED BAIT

O'MALLEY had seen hundreds of men mangled and broken by bombs and shell-fire until they were little but tattered remnants of flesh. But there was something more appalling to him in these peaceful surroundings to think of this old man, probably Bindless, dying alone and dying so horribly. A single glimpse at the ashen face and the flow of blood had convinced the young Irishman that the man was dead.

He bent above the body. Just to the left of the spine and between the shoulder blades there was an indented hole in the smoking jacket and the cloth was soaked with blood for an inch or two round the tear. Bindless had been stabbed in the back.



O'Malley stood erect and stared about, examining the floor and table. In an instant his eye fell on a paper cutter, shaped like a dagger and made of steel, which lay on the table close to the dead man's hand. He moved closer and studied it but was careful not to touch it. The blade was wet with blood an inch or two from the point. The murderer had left his weapon. Indeed, it probably belonged there on the table.

The young Irishman's natural horror was suddenly swept away by a swift flood of anger. Barrett again! And direct, not indirect murder, this time. At the thought his hands clinched at his sides. And momentarily oblivious of his personal danger, he turned and ran lightly toward the curtained doorway into the front room,

determined if the murderer still lurked there, to have it out with him.

He pushed aside the curtain. The darkness beyond it gave him instant pause. Then he thrust his hand into his pocket, drew out a box of matches and struck a light.

A single glance showed him that the room was untenanted. For the sparse and rickety furniture was too lightly built to conceal a child. But the flare of the match showed him, also, that the far door which must lead into the hall somewhere near the front door stood ajar. He had noticed that doorway as he opened the door from the hall into the next room. It had been closed then.

He tiptoed through the front room and out into the hall again, dropping and treading on the burnt match as he reached the hall. Again he stood motionless, peering into the darkness, alert to catch the faintest sound. Suddenly he was aware of footsteps, heavy footsteps. He caught a low murmur of voices. But both kinds of sound seemed to come from outside somewhere. Then he located them. They came from beyond the front door.

In an instant O'Malley awakened to the deadly peril of his own position, there in the house with the murdered man. A thrill of real fear shot through him, lifting the hair on his scalp and tightening his nerves almost to the snapping point. The clangor of a bell shrilled suddenly through the sleeping house. Abruptly the hall in which he stood reverberated with the thunder of blows. Someone was hammering on the front door!

O'Malley stood for an instant in paralyzing indecision. Then he darted along the hall to the basement stairs, slipped down them as silently as possible and came to a sudden halt as he neared the basement door. Beyond the exit and framed in the doorway bulked a familiar, uniformed figure. With a gulp of dismay, O'Malley shrank back to the stairs again, very close to panic. Someone had given the alarm!

His mind was working like lightning now. And suddenly the whole plot flashed clear to him. Barrett had guessed that O'Malley was following and would follow him into the house. He had entered, robbed and murdered Bindless and escaped again, just in the nick of time, by slipping out through that little front room as the Irishman entered the study. But in some way he had tipped off the police so that they would arrive in time to catch O'Malley. He had left O'Malley there to hold the bag; to take the consequences for the murder!

Up the stairs again raced O'Malley, the noise he made covered by that thunderous attack on the front door. Without pausing to study his surroundings further, he ran for the back of the hall, found a door there and flung it open. It led into a narrower hallway, as his questing fingers told him. Into this he darted and along its length, risking a smash for he dared not strike a light. In an instant the little hall opened out into a warm, dark kitchen, reminiscent of good things to eat.

O'Malley halted. The smell of the place and the fact that his outspread arms had lost the walls, told O'Malley where he was. In a moment he made out the faint glow of a shaded window. Praying now if ever for a slice of the O'Malley luck, he ran to it and released the shade. The night sky, still faintly luminous with the lights of the city beneath it, sprang to his eyes. And with fumbling fingers he shot back the bolt and raised the sash, opening the window as softly as he could.

He clambered over a narrow drainboard and leaned out, staring down into a pitch-black yard. The front door bell still shrilled accusingly in the kitchen behind him.

But it was neck or nothing now. From the house behind him a sudden swelling clamor told him that the front door had been forced or opened from within by someone. At the same moment, along the side of the house, outdoors, he caught the thud of running feet. And he climbed to a crouching position on the window sill, poised himself for an instant and then leaped outward and down.

In the dim light he had made out the top of a stone wall. It divided the yard below from that of the next house. And it was only a few feet to the right of his window. The risk of such a leap was great. But it seemed the only chance that offered. For he dared not drop into the arms of a watcher in the darkness below.

Luckily he had judged the distance correctly. His feet struck the top of the wall, slithered across it and slipped off. But his body came down squarely on top of it, partly on his knees and partly on his shoulder. And in an instant he had found his balance.

It was a high wall and the top of it was almost a foot wide. Perching there for

an instant, he heard a runner come blundering round the far corner of the house, on his right. Realizing that he would be silhouetted against the sky, O'Malley dropped flat on his face at once. Then he threw his legs over the far side of the wall.

From the yard on the other side of the wall came a shout and a flash of fire, just as O'Malley dropped. He was certain that the runner had not had time to see him. Therefore there had been another watcher on guard back there.

The drop had been sufficient to send him sprawling. He scrambled to his feet and glanced up swiftly, panting from his recent exertions. Over the edge of the wall appeared a head in a police cap and a broad pair of shoulders. To judge by the way they had shot into sight, one policeman had propelled the other upward toward the coping. For an instant O'Malley contemplated flight. But his position was desperate. He knew that his first movement would disclose him to the policeman on

the wall above his head. And if he ran the "cop" would not hesitate to fire on him. So he crouched in the shadow of the wall and waited.

The policeman threw his legs over, slid to the length of his arms and let go, as O'Malley had done. He, too, lost his footing. And as he scrambled to his feet again O'Malley stepped close and swung his fist beneath the man's ear, with all the force he could summon behind it. The policeman dropped like a stone.

O'Malley raced across the yard, glancing back over his shoulder as he ran. He tripped over something, sprawled his length, scrambled to his feet again and reached the far wall of this yard, just as another head appeared above the wall behind him. But his luck still held. Close by this second wall and overtopping it, stood a rustic summerhouse. O'Malley caught the loom of it just as he sighted the second head. And realizing that it would hide him, he darted between it and the wall he sought.

This latter was a little lower than the first. With a wild leap he managed to get his hands on the top of it and haul himself up, kicking and squirming. Without waiting to look back, he flung himself over and dropped down on the other side. And as he found his feet in somebody's flower bed, there came the shrill of a police whistle from the yard he had just quitted.

The second cop had found his mate. But O'Malley was clear for the moment. Staring hastily about him he saw that there was a much lower wall at the back of this garden. He ran to it and peered over. Beyond lay another garden and, beyond that, houses, back to back with the row he had just left. He vaulted this wall, blundered down the length of the garden and darted along the side of the house to which it belonged. For this should lead him out into a different street.

His feet found a stone paved path which he guessed to be the walk leading to the tradesmen's entrance at the rear. He followed it to the front of the house and crouching low in the shadow there, stared up and down a deserted street. After an instant of uncertainty he took his courage in both hands and crept forward to the pavement. He stood erect and started to walk along the sidewalk. Still there was no shrilling whistle to set him in flight, no pound of running feet in pursuit. He quickened his pace to a fast walk, reached a corner and turned away from the house of Bindless. He reached another corner without alarm, found a parked taxi with the driver dozing over the wheel and climbed into it with a heartfelt sigh of relief. Five minutes later he was far away from the scene of the crime.

O'Malley had never closed his front door behind him with a greater satisfaction than he did that night. But he carried with him to that front door and beyond a burning rage against Ward Barrett.

The trap had failed to close on him. But it had been a near thing.

(*Part II and last in the next issue*)

THE FIVE WHO TURNED BACK

By FRANK C. ROBERTSON

Author of "The Clean-up on Deadman," "The Range Defender," etc.

FIFTY BELOW ZERO ON THE GRIM TRAIL FROM SALMON RIVER TO GREAT SALT LAKE—FIFTY BELOW, WITH FOOD AND SAFETY AT ONE END OF THE GRIM TRAIL, AND A BOX OF GOLD LYING UNGUARDED AT THE OTHER! BECAUSE OF HIS GREAT LOYALTY FUZZY DICK PLAYED A JOKE; BUT THE BEST PART OF IT HE NEVER LEARNED

DOWN the slope came the wagon, the wheels jolting heavily over the frozen ground underneath two feet of soggy snow. Great banks of whitish gray clouds hung low in the Western horizon, and from them came a marrow freezing wind that sent five of the six men in the wagon burrowing deeper into their unrolled bedding. The sixth man, with a great overcoat about him, sat by the brake, apparently unheeding the storm, and urged the four thin, famished horses to the last limit of their endurance. The oaths, the whining and complaining from the back of the wagon must have carried to his ears; but save for a look of contempt that occasionally marked his lips he gave them no attention. From 1850 to 1864 Andy Cheney had been a wagon master and he never yet had failed to get his outfit through. Now, though sure defeat seemed staring him in the face he was on the seat, trying to the last gasp.

A squeal of anguish from the back of the wagon at last caused him to look around. A little figure, with a funny face covered by scraggly whiskers had been propelled from the huddled group till his head and body hung over the hind wheel like the protruding eyes of a bloated steer.

"You fellers let Dick back in there, an' let him alone," Andy Cheney bade sternly. The huddled bodies drew apart until the little man with the fuzzy face wriggled in among them and disappeared from sight.

A mile farther on the off wheeler collapsed in the snow, and refused to rise at Cheney's bidding. Stiffly the wagon boss climbed down over the wheel. His numbed limbs painfully and slowly yielded obedience to an indomitable will. But before he had reached the double-trees to unhook a tug, two more horses were down.

"Git out, you fellers," he called harshly; and the cold wind, growing keener and ever keener seemed to sear his lungs when he opened his mouth to speak. He fumbled in one pocket until he found a jackknife, and then cut the tugs. Ice had formed about the clips and about the buckles of the harness until it practically was impossible to unfasten them. Really, he knew that there was no further use for them. The horses were done—completely done. Finally he had the last starving animal cut loose, and then he returned to the wagon. The shivering figure of little

Fuzzy Dick cowered on the leeward side of the wagon, patently advertising his helplessness in the withering cold. The others had not stirred.

"Git out o' there, yuh bums," Cheney rasped. "If we don't freeze to death tonight we got to have a fire, an' have it quick. I'm not goin' to rustle wood alone."

One by one the other men came out grumblingly. Cheney already was breaking trail through the snow that led to a patch of quaking aspens, and the others followed him. Fortunately a third of the poles were dead, and under Cheney's capable fingers a fire soon was blazing. Then while the four husky men squatted around the fire Cheney's ax bit into the trees, and Fuzzy Dick carried the sticks to the fire.

At last one of the men bestirred himself. "I'll git the grub-box," he volunteered.

"Never mind," Cheney said gruffly, coming over to the fire. "There's just grub enough for one good meal an' we'll need that for breakfast. We'll make coffee an' let it go at that."

"Aw, I guess there's enough for two meals," snarled the miner who called himself "Big Omaha." He kept on toward the wagon, and after a moment of indecision Cheney followed him. Big Omaha was possibly fifty feet ahead.

As Cheney left the radius of the fire Big Omaha's partner, who was known as "Little Omaha," got up and followed the wagon boss stealthily. Fuzzy Dick muttered to himself in perplexity. The other two men, St. Cloud and Marco, lean, hard-faced gamblers who followed the mining booms and preyed upon their fellow men with as little conscience as vultures, looked at each other; a thin-lipped smile of satisfaction bespoke their perfect understanding.

The men's plight was desperate. It had been a daring venture from the beginning, and no wagon boss save Andy Cheney would have undertaken the task of bringing wagons through from the Salmon River gold camps to Salt Lake so late in the fall. Even so the thing would have been possible had there not come the unexpected fall of snow that buried the sparse grass of the Snake River Desert under a blanket of snow that retarded the rolling of the wheels, while at the same time it weakened the horses from starvation. And yet Cheney had forged ahead with the consummate skill of the oldtime freighter. One by one his horses had died, and one by one his other wagons had been left behind. Now, many miles from their destination, they knew that their last horses were done along with practically all of their provisions. But for all that perhaps the thought that dominated the minds of most of them was not the failure of the horses, the lack of provisions, or the insufferable cold, but the knowledge that within the wagon box lay a receptacle containing thirty thousand dollars in gold.

It was a motley crowd that had attached itself to Cheney. The wagon boss was a man of sentiment. Luck had been against

him through the summer, and his plans had gone awry. Upon arriving at the mining camp of Bald Hornet late in October he had decided to winter there. But Jim Halsey, a friend of his, died from injuries soon after his arrival. Halsey had left thirty thousand in gold that he had taken from the last strike.

"I got this money, Andy," he said, "an' my old woman's in Salt Lake without a cent. I wish yuh'd take it down to her this fall if yuh can."

And for the sake of friendship Andy Cheney had made the attempt. If the winter hung off as long as it usually did he felt he could make it by traveling light, taking no freight, and no more provisions than were absolutely necessary. There was a double reason for this last, owing to the fact that Bald Hornet had battened down for the winter, and the local merchants demanded a price for supplies that was little less than robbery.

At first he had planned only on taking Fuzzy Dick as extra teamster, but the two miners, Big and Little Omaha had begged to go along as teamsters and he had taken them. It would be good business to have his wagons in Salt Lake to start north to the mining camps with supplies early in the spring. At the last moment the two gamblers, for whom times were getting too hot in Bald Hornet had asked to be taken along as paying passengers; and he had taken them. But to each man he had intimated clearly that they were risking their lives in the undertaking.

Cheney had been three days out before he knew that the men were cognizant of the gold dust. They had learned it through the prying indiscretion of Fuzzy Dick. The wagon boss had said nothing, but he had not misread the looks in the

men's eyes. More than once he had foiled their efforts to look into the box that he carried under his spring seat.

He knew instinctively that Big Omaha intended to get a look at the gold. From the beginning there had been an armed neutrality between the two miners and the two gamblers, and while they were all at the wagon Cheney felt no fear of the box being molested. But he did intend to see that no one of them pawed around in the wagon-box while he was away.

Big Omaha had disappeared under the canvas when Cheney reached the wagon, but the wagon boss stepped quickly up on the double-trees and reached over the back of the seat. His hand closed over the back of a hairy neck. Big Omaha was on his knees feeling under the seat.

"The coffee pot ain't under there," Cheney growled, and without loosening his hold he clambered up until one knee was in the seat, and his other foot firmly planted on the dash-board. His muscular fingers dug into the cords of the big miner's neck witth a grip that had become like steel from much handling of many lines.

At first Big Omaha sank toward the floor to escape, but it only placed him at a greater disadvantage. He surged upward, and the pain became unbearable. It was strictly against the code of the men of those times to cry out under punishment, but Big Omaha voiced his anguish in a sound that was between a whine and a hiss. Then, with a sudden exertion of all his strength he lurched upward again and broke the hold. The moment he was free he swung a wild, mighty blow at the wagon boss's head, that, had it landed, would have knocked Cheney many feet away. Cheney ducked his head, but his hat was buffeted away into space.

And then Cheney seized Big Omaha by the head with both hands before the miner could recover his balance, and jumped backward. Big Omaha was jerked clear out of the wagon and pitched head first in the snow. In a moment Cheney was kneeling on the fellow's head boring it down through the snow to the frozen ground underneath. He had made up his mind that Big Omaha needed chastisement and he meant to do it thoroughly.

Then Little Omaha stepped around the front wheel of the wagon and took in the spectacle. The smaller miner was really a large man, weighing at least one hundred and seventy, and small only in contrast with his huge pardner who overtopped even Andy Cheney by an inch.

Andy was far too experienced in rough and tumble battles to be caught unawares. At Little Omaha's approach he planted one knee firmly in the middle of his big antagonist's back, and waited on the alert for Little Omaha's next move. That the two had only been waiting an opportunity to do him in he was sure, and he had little fear.

Though all of the men carried guns none of them cared to use them except as a last resource. For one thing they preferred that the fight be carried on in silence, and for another the cutting cold that benumbed their fingers made accurate use of their weapons improbable. Therefore, Little Omaha, after one swift, covert glance around him for a weapon with which to do battle, decided upon the neck-yoke. He sprang to the end of the wagon tongue and seized one end of it, only to find that the end of the tongue, and the cold steel of the rings in both ends had been gripped hard to the ground by the frost. It required a second and a third jerk before it came loose; then as he swung it Andy Cheney leaped upon him. A blow from the wagon boss's fist sent Little Omaha backward into the snow, blood pouring from mangled lips and damaged gums.

Back toward Big Omaha sprang Cheney, determined to put that antagonist out of the battle before he could get up. Then, at that moment occurred one of those ill-timed but quite natural accidents. His toe caught in a greasewood bush under the snow, and he fell head-long, landing almost under Big Omaha, who just then was clawing the snow out of his eyes. In an instant the big miner had pounced upon the teamster, and Little Omaha came reeling back with the neck-yoke to finish the battle.

But so intent had Little Omaha been upon following Cheney that he had neglected to look behind him. Perhaps he would not have minded if he had—for it

was only Fuzzy Dick. Sensing in some way that Andy Cheney, the only man who ever had been kind to him, was in danger, Fuzzy Dick had followed haltingly. He had brought with him the ax which Andy had left behind. As he saw Little Omaha start to

swing the neck-yoke he blindly swung the heavy, double-bitted ax.

Had it landed bit first the razor-sharp edge probably would have ended the miner's career, even with no more than Dick's puny strength behind it; but it turned in his hand and the flat side of the ax crashed against Little Omaha's skull with a dull thud. The handkerchief which the man wore about his ears broke the force of the blow, but even so it was enough to knock the miner down and set his head to ringing. Two such blows as he had received almost had taken the fight out of Little Omaha.

Meantime the two powerful giants in the snow were struggling desperately for mastery. Big Omaha had the advantage of position, and if anything, the advantage in strength; but he lacked self confidence, or perhaps, sportsmanship. At any rate he turned to see why his pardner was not coming to the rescue, and Cheney seized the opportunity to turn him under. The wagon boss's hand shot down to the miner's throat in a grasp that Big Omaha could not loosen. In a minute he was choked into submission, enabling Cheney to rise in time to intercept Little Omaha's enraged assault upon Fuzzy Dick. Seeing that his companion was beaten, Little Omaha quickly began to beg.

"Now one of yuh take the coffee pot, an' the other one the coffee, an' git back to the fire," Cheney ordered with a sardonic grin. "Me an' Dick'll bring yore blankets for yuh—an' I don't want either of yuh to ever come near this wagon again."

As the procession trailed back to the fire a few minutes later, the miners leading with their trivial burdens, the boss and the runty oldster behind with their blankets, the two gamblers' eyes narrowed. Signs of battle were too transparent for them to overlook, and it was not difficult to see who had been the victor. They viewed Andy Cheney with new respect, but with a determined covetousness in no whit abated.

"Throw that truck down anywhere, Fuzzy," Cheney said, unburdening himself of his own load. He casually patted his small helper on the shoulder, and was quite unaware that the meager breast of Fuzzy Dick swelled with pride. In his quiet, offhand way Cheney tried to be fair with the little man who had become accidentally attached to his wagon train, and to do this it had been necessary frequently for him to take his part against the rough men who were always ready to pick upon or abuse anyone so helpless. That he had won a doglike devotion from the runt did not enter his mind. But Fuzzy Dick was forty years old, and Andy Cheney was the only man he had ever known who had shot square with him. It was no wonder that he worshipped.

The coffee was drunk in silence, and the men looked at Cheney questioningly.

"We'll git wood enough to keep a big fire goin'," he said simply. "Men have froze to death in their blankets on a night like this. Come on, le's the rest of us git our blankets."

St. Cloud and Marco obediently followed the wagon boss, and as usual Fuzzy Dick brought up the rear. They reached the wagon and Cheney handed out the remainder of the bedding. With his blanket roll over his shoulder Marco hesitated, and then he demanded bluntly, "What are you goin' to do with the gold?"

"To hell with the gold," Cheney snorted. "If we git out o' here with our skins we'll do well."

Apparently satisfied the gamblers led the way back to the fire.

The next morning Cheney was up at daylight. The cold was intense. Before sun-down the night before it had been below zero; now it was fifty below, so cold that breathing was a torture. Cheney heaped more wood on the fire, and then walked to the wagon for the grub box. His eyes lighted upon the four horses. They had not moved fifty feet from where the wagon had stopped, and every one of them was stiff in death—frozen.

The wagon boss crawled under the canvas cover and explored beneath the seat. The wooden box still was in place. He hefted it gently. A peculiar smile crossed his face. Next he turned his attention to the grub box. The food supply was alarmingly short; not nearly enough, indeed, for a breakfast for the six of them. Cheney frowned, and then he thought of the dead horses. It would be possible to cut a few steaks from the carcasses, and that would provide the men with strength for the grim undertaking that lay ahead.

He had the breakfast cooked before he routed the other men from their blankets. In icy discomfort they ate the meal, the miners grumbling at the horse meat, the gamblers tensely waiting for developments. Andy Cheney, seemingly oblivious to his companions, yet was aware that there was a subtle change in their demeanor. Gradually he divined that it was mutual suspicion; not only the miners against the gamblers, but the gamblers against each other, and the miners also against each other.

All of them, of course, against Cheney himself. Fuzzy Dick alone wolfed his food without thought of his fellows.

"The situation stacks up like this," Cheney said, as soon as they had eaten. "Our grub's gone, an' we're forty-five miles to Call's Fort, the nearest settlement. It's no certainty there's anybody there, an' if there *ain't* we don't stand one chance in a hundred of gittin' on to Ogden! We'll cook a few horse steaks, an' then it'll be every man for himself."

Four of the men nodded in sullen agreement. After all it was the thing they desired. Fuzzy Dick looked astonished, hurt. Somehow he had figured that Andy Cheney in some way would see him through. Dull though he was he knew that his strength was too puny to get him through alone. Cheney and Big Omaha probably woud make it; Little Omaha and the two gamblers stood a chance, but he, never.

Half an hour later they were ready to start. Big Omaha led off, trampling the snow down under foot as unscientifically as an angry bull. The others saw that he was giving himself out needlessly, but they offered no advice. Perhaps none of them guessed his purpose.

Cheney found himself behind with Fuzzy Dick. "Just take yore time, Dick; don't worry yoreself out so's yuh can't keep walkin', because if yuh do yuh'll freeze. If anybody can git through I can, an' I promise yuh to send back help to pick yuh up."

Fuzzy Dick sighed with relief. His hero had not failed him. He even managed a leer at the backs of the other men; they had no such promise of help.

"S-s-say, Andy," he began. Stuttering was another of his numerous afflictions. "Wha-what w-was B-Big Omaha f-fightin y'about?"

"Big Omaha had an idee he wanted that box I hauled underneath the seat," Cheney answered carelessly, and strode on, deliberately setting each foot in the tracks left by the men ahead.

In less than an hour Big Omaha had slumped down in the snow. "I'm done," he groaned. "Somebody else'll have to break trail."

As Little Omaha evinced no inclination to assume the burden the two gamblers passed them by. In another hour Andy Cheney was breaking trail, and he was doing it systematically and thoughtfully. The bitter cold had forced a hard crust on the snow, and frozen out much of the moisture underneath. But the crust just fell short of holding a man's weight. It almost would hold it, and then, just when

the man was ready to step ahead it would break, and down would go the man to knee or thigh.

Cheney wasted no effort trying to stay on top of the crust. The forty odd miles he had to traverse was a rolling plain. Preceding winds had drifted the snow in places until it lay waist deep. On the level it was above his knees. But each time he stepped he brought his foot down hard enough to break the crust, and wallowed through. In the deeper places he broke the crust with his hands. Had the snow been wet and heavy progress would have been impossible, and he must surely have frozen; but the cold had done him that one favor in that the snow was light and dry. Even so he could not make a mile an hour, and he was compelled many times to stop, wrap up in his blankets, and rest.

At the end of the second day he knew that he was not yet half way. His food was gone. The cold and exposure had turned his face to the consistency of dirty, brown leather. The weather had moderated, but it brought a new terror—that the sun would come out and he would be stricken with snow blindness. That would be the end. But he plodded grimly on. He knew that he had left all of his men far behind, and occasionally he chuckled mirthlessly.

"If it wasn't for poor little old Fuzzy Dick it'd serve 'em right not to send 'em help," Cheney murmured once.

FUZZY DICK, dragging along behind, had found himself obliged to rest again and again. The men ahead of him were little more than specks on the landscape, but he saw that one was drawing away rapidly from the others. His brain moved slowly, but many times he reached a logical conclusion which a more facile brain might have overlooked. There was something about the attitude of the four men which distressed him greatly. He had divined that they meant to do Cheney harm—the two miners already had attempted it. It must be, he thought, in connection with the gold. And then the idea leaped to his brain. What if they should try to come back and steal the gold while Cheney went ahead?

Fuzzy Dick stopped and pondered the possibilities. He discarded the idea once and plugged ahead, but the idea would not down. Then the notion of how he might do Andy a good turn struck full blown into his mind. He turned around and retraced his steps hastily. Since five heavy men had been over the trail it was not so bad.

At last he reached the deserted wagon and peered around. The gold was there. He must hide it. Then when the thieves came back they would find nothing, and he could tell Andy where he had hidden it. The question now was, where could he hide it? He tentatively had hefted the box several times and knew that the dust with its container weighed approximately ninety pounds. For him to carry it any distance was out of the question. The fact that he could not leave the few trails around the wagon without betraying his purpose presented a great difficulty in hiding the gold, but he was determined to accomplish it somehow.

The gold he found in four small, buckskin bags. He could feel plainly the dust and nuggets inside. He lugged one of them out and carried it in his arms up the trail that had been beaten down from the wagon to the clump of quaking aspens where they had had their fire. There were hundreds of small trees, and he had noticed that frequently there were a few inches of space between the edge of the snow crust and the trunks of the trees. He stood in the trail and picked out one such tree about twenty-five feet distant. Bracing himself firmly he swung the sack several times, and then let go. It struck the tree and sank instantly out of sight in the snow. The loose, powdery stuff at once settled over it, and there was nothing to make that tree distinguishable from hundreds of others.

Fuzzy Dick returned hastily to the wagon, secured another sack and disposed of it in the same way at the foot of another tree close by. The other two quickly followed. He grunted with satisfaction. Andy and he could find the sacks easily enough, but he would like to see any of those other fellows find them. Then, suddenly terrified lest they return and discover him there, he hurried along the trail toward Call's Fort.

He had not gone far past the place where he had turned back until he came upon Big Omaha sitting dejectedly in the snow beside the trail. At his approach the big miner looked up mournfully, and then dropped his head in his hands again.

"Wha-what's the m-matter?" Fuzzy Dick inquired.

"Sick, deathly sick!" the man groaned.

"An-anything I-I can d-do?" Fuzzy Dick queried.

"You can git t' hell outa here," the big miner rasped. "That damned horse meat has killed me."

Fuzzy Dick passed on, and presently he came upon Little Omaha beside the trail. Fuzzy Dick paused. Of all the men he feared Little Omaha most. He had always been his worst persecutor, and it was certain the miner had not forgotten the blow of the ax. Fear clutched the little man's heart as he saw Little Omaha glance furtively up and down the trail, and then start toward him. With a squawk of fear he started to run, but Little Omaha quickly caught him.

"I'll learn ye t' come in t' my scraps," the miner growled. He kicked the little man and cuffed him till he was tired out. Then he flung him into the snow, where Fuzzy Dick lay inert, sobbing out his misery and cursing feebly. With a final, parting kick Little Omaha left him, and took the back trail.

Fuzzy Dick was still lying there when Marco came back and passed him without a word. He had got to his feet and started on again when he met St. Cloud.

"If you live to see Cheney tell him I couldn't make it, and that I've gone back to live on them dead horses till help comes," the gambler said.

As he passed out of sight Fuzzy Dick shook his fist along the back trail. They had gone back, had they? Well, he knew what they had gone for, and how they were going to be fooled. And how he and Andy Cheney would laugh!

He trudged on. Presently he reached the place where St. Cloud had turned back. From there on there was only Andy Cheney's tracks to guide him, but slowly, tediously, painfully he stepped as near as he could where Cheney had stepped. Exhaustion claimed him, and he rolled up in his blankets on the trail. He would awaken, get up and plod on. The periods of sleep came oftener and lasted longer, but Fuzzy Dick had within his dwarfed soul the spirit of a hero. He persevered grimly, determined that when Cheney came back with the rescue party he would not have far to go to find him.

It was a mercy that he did not realize what pitifully small progress he was making.

BACK at the wagon the afternoon of that first day Big Omaha lifted the edge of the wagon cover and began to climb in. There was a grin of triumph on his face. What a fool Cheney had been to leave all that gold in the wagon! The box was in place, and he drew it toward him gloatingly. Then the grin was erased as by magic as he sensed its emptiness.

He had been in the wagon long enough the evening before to lift the box and he knew that at *that* time it had been heavy! How then had it become empty? Andy Cheney could not have carried the dust away with him, and it seemed incredible that he could even have moved it away from the wagon without someone knowing about it. It must be, he decided, concealed somewhere in the wagon. Cheney could have moved it there while he was throwing out the bedding.

Big Omaha fell to work frantically moving things about inside the wagon box until he had covered every inch. Then, like an enraged badger sticking its head above its hole he knelt in the bottom of the box and stuck his bewhiskered visage between the edge of the box and the canvas, and glared around.

His face presented a remarkably fine shot for Little Omaha, who had been waiting deliberately for him to show himself. The smaller miner pulled trigger, and Big Omaha slumped down inside the wagon box. Little Omaha found him there later with a small, blue hole directly between the eyes.

"Thought yuh'd sneak back an' cheat yer pardner did ye?" Little Omaha sneered. He saw the box just inside and reached into it confidently. A moment later a blank look crossed his face as his groping hand encountered nothing but the bare wood.

Again the wagon was subjected to a thorough search. At last the miner desisted, and a feeling akin to pain swept over him. He had found no gold, and he had the body of a dead man to account for. The one thought then that entered his mind was that he must get away. When he met the rescue party he would deny knowledge of Big Omaha. If he could only pass one or both of the gamblers they would be the ones who would be suspected.

He dropped out of the wagon, and fell back with a gasp of alarm. Before him stood Marco. The gambler knew his advantage and he was quick to use it. Before Little Omaha could do more than fumble for his gun Marco's knife flashed through the cold air and was buried to the hilt in the miner's breast. Little Omaha took two or three staggering steps and fell face forward in the snow.

Marco's search for the gold was more systematic than that of the miners, but his disappointment was no less keen than theirs had been when it finally dawned upon him that the gold was gone. He tried to figure out who had hidden it. Like Big Omaha he was sure that Cheney could not have taken it, and what he had seen indicated that Little Omaha had not found it. He looked balefully at the dead body of the larger miner, but still, he asked himself what was Big Omaha doing in the wagon if already he had concealed the gold? Of one thing he was sure; the gold had to be close around, for it was too heavy for anyone to have carried far. He could live on frozen horse meat until Cheney's rescue party returned, and he would have ample time to dispose of the two dead bodies and search for the gold.

Darkness was approaching, so he built a fire in the same spot where it had been the night before and huddled near it, going over and over in his mind the possible hiding places.

He was sitting thus, his figure clearly outlined against the blaze, when St. Cloud came stealthily down the trail. St. Cloud paused in the darkness just outside the circle of fire-light, and regarded his former companion broodingly. For a long time after he had turned back he had expected to meet the two miners and Marco and explain to them as he had explained to Fuzzy Dick. Then it had dawned upon him that all of them had also gone back, and he was sure for the same thing that had caused him to turn back—the gold. He knew that he must be cautious, and not stumble upon any of them blindly.

Now that he could see Marco hovering over the fire with an air of perfect safety, he guessed nearer the truth; that Marco had followed and done away with the two miners. Suddenly he stepped into the fire-light directly behind Marco with a small, blue derringer held steadily in his hand. "Sit still," he purred. "Where have you hid it?"

Marco gave a convulsive start, but did not dare to look around; he knew those suave tones too well. "Hid what?" he countered, and began to feel surreptitiously for his knife.

"Cheney's gold. You didn't come back for a rest," St. Cloud retorted.

"It's gone," Marco acknowledged. "Big Omaha was the first one back here an' he must have hid it. His pardner had killed him, and I killed his pardner."

"You lie," St. Cloud hissed. "You'll tell me where that gold is or I'll shoot you where you sit."

"All right then, I hid it under the snow right beside the trail there behind you," Marco lied. He was sure that St. Cloud would turn around involuntarily, and he leaped to his feet with his knife in his hand.

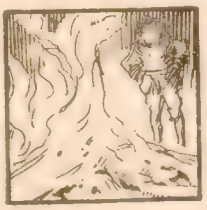
St. Cloud had turned, but he had kept one eye upon his former partner. As the knife flashed he fired, and Marco collapsed in a heap, reddening the snow with his blood.

In the morning St. Cloud began a systematic search. The box had been looted by somebody beside Cheney, he was sure, and he was reasonably certain that Marco was the man who last had the gold.

Half a day's search brought conviction to his mind that he had been mistaken, however. He began to remember now the pose in which he had found Marco. There had been no air of triumph. Marco could not have found the gold. The position of the other two dead men, Big Omaha still in the wagon-box, Little Omaha lying by the front wheel, indicated that they, too, had been unsuccessful. It was Cheney, then, who had out-witted all of them. He might have known that, St. Cloud thought. But the great question was, how had he done it?

Little by little St. Cloud began to figure out the answer. The gold had been left in the wagon that morning, and Cheney had walked away without a backward look. Of them all who could Cheney trust? Just one—Fuzzy Dick! The answer seemed fairly to leap into his mind, so logical was it that he wondered why he had not grasped it before. Cheney had told Fuzzy Dick to sneak back and change the gold sacks, no doubt promising to come back and rescue him. Then, somewhere under the snow was the gold, and it would be a hopeless task to try to find it. One chance alone remained; overtake Fuzzy Dick and force him to tell what he had done with the gold.

St. Cloud was no fool. He saw clearly what he had to accomplish. Despite the fact that Fuzzy Dick had a start of several hours, St. Cloud knew that he must take time to dispose of the three bodies some way. He had no desire to be hanged. There were, of course, a pick and shovel in the wagon box. He got them out and, shoveling the ashes and embers from where the fire had been, he began to dig. The heat of the fire had thawed the ground out to a considerable depth, so the task of digging the grave was not so formidable as he had imagined it would be. In a couple of hours he had a grave deep enough to contain the three bodies and afford them a covering of soil. He tramped the dirt down over them hard until the surface was smooth. Then he



shoveled all the ashes back on top and scattered them around thoroughly. To complete the job he chopped more dry poles and built up a great, booming fire. He had no fear of that part of the job being a failure.

His next task was to cut more steaks of horse meat and broil them over the fire. After he had eaten all he dared he made a bundle of the remainder inside his blanket roll, and prepared to start. He was reasonably sure that he still had time to overtake Fuzzy Dick, for the weakling certainly could not make good time. And he had no doubt whatever that he could make the schemer tell where he had hidden the gold. Then he would dispose of him by hiding his body under some snow drift and go on until he met Cheney's relief party. He would, of course, deny all knowledge of the others. The relief party would go on to the wagon and find nothing. There could be but one conclusion; that they had wandered from the trail and frozen to death.

He traveled until far into the night before he lay down to sleep; and he was up again at daylight. It was getting very difficult to follow the trail made by Cheney and Fuzzy Dick, for now that he was getting out where the valley widened into a great plain a rather keen wind was blowing, and tiny particles of frosted snow were being hurried along the crust. The trail had filled up entirely in many places, and on the ridges even it had crusted over.

He could not complain, however, for it removed the last chance that he ever would

be suspected of killing any of the other men. With the trail full of snow like he found, no one could venture to assert that the other men might not have become lost and wandered aside to perish of the cold.

All day long he strode forward, feverishly scanning the horizon ahead for some sign of the man he sought. Not until darkness overtook him did he begin to worry. The weather remained unchanged except that he felt the wind rising steadily. All night long he lay in his blankets and shivered. By morning he was afraid there would be no vestige of a trail left.

But in the morning he was agreeably surprised to find that in the bottoms of the hollows he could just discern a thin line, slightly whiter than the rest that marked the place where the crust had been broken. He ate the remainder of the horse meat and forged ahead.

He did not notice where Fuzzy Dick had lost the trail for Cheney's trail was drifted completely over at that point, but he did notice that the trail grew more and more distinct. He even found where the little half wit had rolled up in his blankets. A savage glint of triumph came into St. Cloud's face. On top of a low, rolling ridge, less than a mile away he saw the man he sought.

At the foot of the ridge was a narrow gulch. There was not even a willow bush to indicate that a deep, narrow creek ran down the bottom of it; the snow had drifted over concealing it entirely. The hard-packed snow had held up Little Fuzzy Dick, but as St. Cloud blundered out, it gave way like a miniature snow slide. The gambler plunged through into icy water up to his knees. Instinctively striking out with his hands he plunged both arms in up to the shoulders!

In a frenzy of fear and shock he scrambled out, but the damage had been done. He was soaked, and already he could feel his feet and hands beginning to freeze. Frightened as he was he yet had presence of mind enough to know that he must have a fire and dry himself right away if he was to cheat death. He scanned the landscape longingly, but there was not a tree in sight.

Half sobbing in his misery he took up the pursuit of Fuzzy Dick. He knew that he must have human help if he was to survive. No longer had he any thought of gold. His legs became numb, and he dragged them along like pieces of lumber. His hands, too, had no more feeling than clubs. He tried to beat them on his breast to restore circulation, but it slowed him down and he desisted. He whimpered, calling on Fuzzy Dick to wait for him.

A hideously long time later he saw a thin column of smoke ahead of him. Floundering on desperately, at last he dragged his frozen limbs over a ridge and saw the scrawny form of Fuzzy Dick crouched over a fire in a thicket of aspens.

Fuzzy Dick sprang up with a cry of alarm, but he was too weak and exhausted to either flee or fight.

"For God's sake get my boots off," St. Cloud implored.

Fuzzy Dick had to cut the gambler's boots and socks from his feet, and when he finaly peeled them off the man's legs were black from the knees down. His hands also were frozen.

"God," St. Cloud whimpered, "I'll lose 'em."

"I'm lost," Fuzzy Dick whimpered back, and began to break down more dead trees.

THREE days later the rescue party from Call's Fort found them there, guided to them by the smoke of the last dry tree in the little grove. Andy Cheney had won through and come back with help. The wagon boss had lain in the bottom of a wagon box and slept most of the return journey, so he was comparatively fresh.

"This is a problem, boys," he told the men from Call's Fort. "There's just a chance that St. Cloud will live if we can git him back to a doctor an' cut off them hands an' legs right away. On the other hand we can't till we've found the other three men."

"You can't find 'em," St. Cloud cried shrilly. "They're dead, every one of 'em." And in desperation lest he lose the one slim chance of life that remained, he told what he knew.

"Then we'll start back," Cheney said. He turned to Fuzzy Dick. "Did you really go back an' hide that—them sacks?" he asked.

"I sh-sh-sure d-did," the little man said weakly, but with great pride.

Cheney wrung his hand. "You're all right, Dick—you're a brick," he said.

Not for anything would Andy Cheney have told the little man that he himself had hidden the gold one night far back on the trail when it became evident that he could not get a wagon through; or that he had filled the four bags he had brought along, with lead and sand!

LOGS

By FRANK RICHARDSON PIERCE

Author of "Fresh Meat," "Gun Madness," etc.

TWO POWERFULLY POTENT REASONS AROSE TO PREVENT JACK KENT FROM WARRING UPON THE MAN SAID TO HAVE MURDERED BUCK KENT. JACK OVERCAME THE FIRST REASON, WON THE SECOND—AND ESTABLISHED STILL A THIRD AND MOST CONCLUSIVE REASON

Chapter I

FIGHT OR RUN

FOR the tenth time Jack Kent stopped abruptly, gripped by a sense of impending danger. There was nothing in the night silence of the forest to alarm him. From man's viewpoint the night was peaceful. Moonlight silvered the tops of the great fir stands with enough filtering through the canopy of branches to light the way. The massive trunks loomed ghostly in silent contemplation. Creatures of claw and fang moved silently on either side of the trail; the usual nocturnal tragedies were being enacted on this as other nights. In the distance a fawn suddenly bawled as a cougar dropped silently from an overhanging limb. The struggle must have ended quickly for the cry was not repeated. The forest folk apparently understood the meaning of the brief cry, soft rustlings ceased for a moment, then near at hand Kent heard the pattering of alarmed feet. It was all as Nature ordered it; the strong preyed on the weak. Kent laughed it off. "I've been away from the timber country too long," he assured himself. "I'm imagining things."

His lithe movements, the tireless stride, the sureness with which his feet followed the trail through the rot of the forest floor all bespoke long experience in the timber country. Judge Sloan's words perhaps had unduly alarmed him. "Your father died in the midst of the battle of his life, my boy. About all you have inherited is the losing end of a three-cornered fight, a blood feud and a stand of timber burdened with debt. The future is up to you. You can fight or run. By running you'll save somethin, by fighting you'll lose all. You'll fight, of course!"

"Naturally," Kent had replied.

"There may be a way out, but no man knows it," the Judge had replied, "I can see no legal escape; there may be some physical method of escape, within the law, that you'll perhaps discover when you reach the scene."

Now Kent was returning and he believed his movements unknown to the enemy. He wanted to slip into the fight under cover of night; to get onto the ground before a rearrangement of forces could take place. The enemy had reason to believe he was following a life of dissipation in the East; that he was a runner, not a fighter.

The premonition of danger felt on occasion by all wild animals and by men to a lesser degree again swept through him. Instinct fairly clutched at his shoulders.

He whirled as a figure detached itself from the gloom, leapt and dragged him to the ground. Kent shook himself furiously, fought a way to his feet and freed himself of the heavy pack on his shoulders. Once unburdened, he hurled the sixty pounds of equipment squarely in the other's face. The unknown antagonist went down, yelling: "Get into the fight, Pete! You yellow?"

Running feet caught Kent's ear, he picked up the pack again and hurled it just as an automatic pistol spat. The armed man's aim was disturbed, the bullet whined, and spatted against a tree. Kent leaped a log. His heavy boots impinging squarely, drove the breath and fight from the tardy Pete. He writhed in the grass too badly winded to realize what was taking place. Kent jerked the pistol from his hand and tapped him on the head with the butt. The groaning ceased. Kent turned his attention to number one. With rare presence of mind that worthy was quitting the field. The man's efforts to put a large tree between himself and Kent were laughable.

"Stop, or I'll fire!" shouted Kent in warning. An instant later the pistol cracked, its slug of lead severing a small flick of bark from the trunk of a poplar near the fugitive's shoulder. The man plunged headlong into a thicket of devil's clubs. Kent heard him cursing horribly as the thorns ripped his clothing and flesh.

Shielding his own eyes, Kent plunged in pursuit. His legs sank deep in the mucky ground. Cold water soaked through his clothing. He struggled a moment, then turned back. Fortune had favored the other, who had gained firmer ground; the echo of his thumping feet told of fast progress in the general direction of elsewhere. "A bird in the hand—" began Kent, then realized that he had been occupied several minutes freeing himself from the muck. The log was there, the vegetation matted and broken, but the bird in hand had joined its fellow in the bush.

Kent grunted in disgust. "Wonder what nationality beside Esquimaux can stand a crack on the head, a kick in the stomach then still have strength and sense enough remaining to escape? If that pair had shown a little teamwork they'd have trimmed me in fine style."

He examined his pack and found evidence of his own good fortune. A bullet had torn its way half through and stopped against the bit of a hand axe. It was self evident his arrival was not unheralded, unless the pair had mistaken him for some one else. Action was beginning from the moment he stepped on his own timber land. He decided to keep his own pistol, carried thus far in the pack, within reach of his steady right hand.

The uproar of battling men had silenced the woods as no battle of wild folk possibly could have done. Kent's progress was gained through a quiet world of timber until shortly after dawn when a big blue grouse soared from the trail just ahead with a thrilling whirr of wings. Kent watched it bank beautifully and vanish behind a tree.

Ahead the ringing of an axe was the sweetest music he ever had heard. Jack Kent was home!

Five minutes later he emerged from the timber and looked down at the camp. Smoke was drifting lazily from the cookhouse and here and there a logger was performing morning ablutions. In a clearing Kent caught sight of a row of neat cottages, each with a plot of garden truck in the rear. Then Mike Coyle saw him and roared a surprised greeting.

Kent had planned to regard nearly everyone with suspicion, as Judge Sloan had told him frankly there were enemies within as well as without his organization, but the newcomer simply could not regard faithful old Mike with anything but affection. The big Irishman placed his freckled paws on Kent's wide shoulders and looked him squarely in the eyes. "Damned lies!" he growled belligerently, "and I *knew* it!"

"What lies?" demanded Kent.

"The stories that come from the East of your wild carryings on. Your eyes are clear and your skin glows with clean living. Damned lies spoken for the purpose of worrying your old dad when he was nigh overwhelmed with troubles!"

"And you're the same old Mike," replied Kent, "profane, but never blasphemous, face as red and hair redder than ever. And it seems to me you're getting bald in front."

"Not on your life, my boy, it's only the lengthening of an already long head. But enough of talk, each knows we're glad to meet. Let's go to the office until the cook yells breakfast. There's much to be talked over; but first, what's the word of the future, that I may put the boys at ease? Be-

cause the Kents owned this stand of timber and K-E-N-T is another way of spelling square deal some of the best boys in the timber country have joined us, brought their families and built themselves bits of a home figuring to have steady work for years to come. Now, with all the rumors we're feeling like that old boy with the sword over his head, Dim—Dem—Dam or someting like that."

"Damocles."

"That's the cuss."

"I've been East as you know, Mike, finishing up an education interrupted by the war and helping my dad establish himself when I should have been attending school. His death brought me West on the jump. Judge Sloan outlined conditions briefly while I was in Seattle. We'll fight to the finish. Tell the boys so. I'll give them advance notice when the money gets so low I can't take care of the pay roll."

"It's what I've been telling 'em. Now I'll tell 'em again!" The camp superintendent stepped outside. "Yarrow!" he called in a stentorian voice. "Yarrow, tell the boys Jack Kent's here and the camp will run as usual for a while."

Yarrow did not need to relay the message. Coyle's booming announcement reached the row of cottages; and from various buildings came whoops of joy.

"First, Coyle, what caused my father's death? He was in the prime of life."

"And you didn't know? Nobody told you?" Coyle shook his head, sighed heavily. "Shot from ambush, by parties unknown! Maybe I'd better say parties unnamed, instead. There's some think one thing and others think something else. I'm naming no names, but I'll spread the mess out for you to see. Refresh your memory a bit. The Kents own all the timber between the North and South Forks of the river, except a fringe where the section line runs this side of the South Fork. That narrow strip puts the South Fork in Carter's holdings, worse luck. The North Fork of the river divides your timber and Kerrick's timber. Your dad's plan was to raft his logs down the North Fork to tidewater; and he did it the first two springs. Kerrick is a kind of a nut who don't want to cut his timber; instead he raises lettuce on that black loam around his lake. It gives him a steady income, enough to live comfortably and he says that's all he wants in this world."

"He's right at that," said Kent.

"Maybe so, but he's a nut!"

"Is he an enemy?"

"You couldn't call him a friend. He and your dad had a beautiful fight across the river one day. I watched it behind a good, thick stump. They used thirty-thirty rifles, and it was Kerrick that started it. He threatened to shoot your dad on sight after that day."

"And did?" queried Kent, his eyes narrowing.

"Nobody knows!" replied Coyle. "Now come with me!" He led the way from camp toward the river—or what had once been a river. An exclamation of surprise was wrung from Kent as he looked down the water course. All that remained was the boulder strewn bed, winding like some great snake through the green forest. The bank, even the bed itself was covered with logs ready to be floated down stream. Kent's practiced eye scaled the timber and roughly estimated the value. He knew now where the Kent fortune had gone. It lay along this river bed awaiting water.

"You see, Jack, the answer to all your problems except the blood feud with Kerrick, is water. Get water into this river bed and those logs will bring you enough to weather any financial storm; and *there's* water, a lake of it!" Coyle pointed upstream.

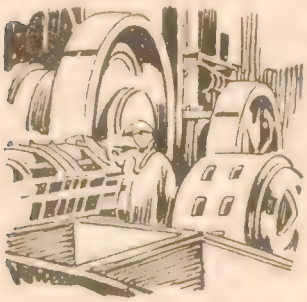
Engineers had driven a mighty wedge of concrete between the granite walls of what had once been the V-gorge of Spruce Falls. The pool below, from whence trout had leaped at careless flies, now showed as an empty basin except for a small quantity of stagnant seepage.

"Carter's dam!" said Coyle and his tone indicated everything was explained thereby. "Carter's dam and lake are on the North Fork, but his power house is on the South Fork, put there, he says, because he can get a greater fall of water. He seems able to prove that by engineers, too. The diversion robs the North Fork of water and gives the South Fork a double supply, after it goes through the turbines. The water is carried through the ridge in tunnels. Now Carter can float logs down the South Fork *any* time of the year! He can play the market. Before, all of us used to have to wait until there was a flood!"

"But we must have some rights," Kent insisted. "A man can't dry up a natural water course to the damage of another."

"That's the law to cover usual cases, but Carter slipped one over. Your dad belonged to the early school of Puget Sound lumbermen. Those bullies might fight to the death, but they kept their word even to their worst enemies. Million dollar

deals were put through without a name being signed to paper. Carter, on the other hand, is one of the new crowd. He took advantage of the custom. He pointed out to your dad the dam would benefit him. It would insure him water when he needed it, and hold up flood waters that sometimes raised the devil with booms. It would do just that and all of that—if Carter was square. Tucked away in the contract, however, were some trick clauses. One of 'em is that the turbine requirements of water come first because the plants supply cities with light and power. That's the main joker. Carter's got a lot of back country to flood, and water never comes over the spillway. It's all 'required for turbines.'



"That was what made your dad cut loose. He was a two-fisted fighter. He proceeded to make it so hot for Carter the yellow skunk cleared out and left the fighting to his hired men. Ever since there's been trouble, trouble, trouble. Not the kind where you could go out with fists and pick handles, fight it out and clear the atmosphere, but the sort you couldn't put your finger on. The climax came when your dad was across the river trying to make peace with Kerrick so the two of 'em could fight Carter. He just got to Kerrick's timber when he dropped. A thirty-thirty rifle bullet killed him."

For several minutes Kent was silent. He evidently was thinking of Kerrick when he spoke. "I hate blood feuds," he said thoughtfully, "but I'm not going to rest until I hunt down my father's murderer. When I find him I hope it's in the open and that *he* fights! That seems to be my first duty. The other, the timber, doesn't count."

Coyle nodded. Anything Jack Kent said must of necessity be correct. He was for it, heart and soul. "You figure on declaring war on Kerrick right off the bat?"

Kent nodded slowly. "Judge Sloan said there were two reasons why I should not fight Kerrick, and the main one was self interest. He laughed when I asked the second reason. The judge, of course, did not know father had been shot."

"Yes, self interest is a reason," agreed Coyle, "because the two of you are in the same boat. When Kerrick logs he will have to use this river, but he don't want to log; that makes it easy for Carter. I told you he was a nut, with his lettuce."

"What's the second reason?"

In moments of deep anger or vast amusement Coyle's reversion to a slight brogue confirmed that which his red hair and name suggested. Now his eyes twinkled merrily. "Ah, Jackie me lad it's yourself that'll learn the second reason, and I'm not sure but what the second reason will solve the whole problem." Almost instantly he became serious again, as he added: "But both reasons will go into discard if Charley Kerrick shot your dad on sight as he promised to do."

"I'll learn the second reason within a few days, Mike, but in the meantime I'm hurrying to Seattle. Water is the answer to my problem, but next to that is time. I've got to have time on those mortgages and more money if the camp is to keep going. Sooner or later I'll get water!"

Chapter II

A Banker Speaks His Mind

IT WAS two days later that Jack Kent and Judge Sloan were ushered into the president's office of the City National Bank at Seattle. Kent got to the point at once. "You hold notes against us, and they are due this year. We've got to have an extension."

The president was equally frank. "Mr. Kent, I appreciate your position, but I am helpless. Carter is no friend of mine. He could not borrow a nickel from us, since we know his game. It has taken years of clever work for him to reach this point, and he won't back down. He tried to buy your notes through a friend, but we refused to deal with him in justice to your father. Now he is waiting. He is playing a game and the stakes are big—your timber holdings. Bought at the price he wishes to offer, he'll pay for his power plant from your logs alone! He holds a whip over you, and that whip is water. We've had our engineers and our attorneys go into this thing, and, my boy, there isn't a chance of escape from his trap. He merely sits idly by and folds his hands. His work is done.

"Our first duty is to those who deposit money with us. We'll do well in this case if we come clear ourselves. When your property goes under the hammer there'll

be but one bidder—Carter. No one else will take a chance."

Jack Kent nodded. He knew the banker spoke the truth. "I'm not whipped yet," he said as he left the office, "and I assure you I see your viewpoint. I'd do likewise if I were in your shoes."

The banker's hand fell on his shoulder. "Good luck, Jack, I hope you win; but if you go under come around and perhaps we can help you a little in your new start."

"Well what next?" queried the Judge when they reached the street.

"A forlorn hope," replied Kent. "Bluff, pure and simple! We're going to see Carter!"

"That's carrying the fight to the enemy," replied the Judge, "but don't blow up and try rough methods if he insults you; nothing would suit him better than to get you into jail."

"Oh, I'll keep my temper, but there'll be no beating around the bush." Kent drove up the street in a hurry.

IN HIS small, plainly furnished office Carter awaited their coming. He recognized Judge Sloan and knowing young Kent was in town put two and two together. Though he was a comparatively young man of powerful build, nevertheless a strange, foreboding sensation swept through Carter as Jack Kent entered the room. Carter shook the feeling of premonition from him. "He's the one who is cornered," he told himself fiercely, "not I." His eyes were cold and without mercy when he looked up at Kent. "Yes?" was all he said.

"How much do you want for sufficient water to float my logs?" Kent stated the query without preliminary.

"Nothing, of course," answered Carter coolly, "you are entitled to any excess free of charge, but the devil of it is there is no excess at present. Next winter——"

"Next winter there may be a good storm, doubtless will be, but that won't help me much. Let's talk turkey, Carter. I know your game and you know that I know it. You think you've got me. Well you haven't got me, but you can make it damned expensive for me to wiggle out. Either you sell me water or I'll run in a spur or truck road and get the logs out that way."

Carter drummed with his fingers on the battered desk. Both hands were half closed as if ready to clutch something their owner fancied. He mused aloud. "Either a bridge or a lot of grade work across the gulch; several more bridges and at least one deep cut through granite, besides equipment—either locomotive and cars or trucks, sidings, loaders and—no, Kent, getting down to turkey as you suggest. *that's* bluff! You are contemplating nothing of the sort. No banker will advance you that amount and besides it will eat up the profit and then some. I guess, Kent, your only hope lies in prayer or a rain maker. A good storm is your only way out, for really I can't supply you with sufficient water!"

"Then road building it is. I'll doubtless go broke, but I'll take away a lot of cream you figure on skimming." Kent nodded briefly and departed.

Carter reflected for several minutes then called the power house by private wire. "Hello Gregg, Carter speaking! Young Kent was just in. He'll be pie for us to handle. He's a big kid, but I don't think he's the fighter the old man was. Tried a pitiful bluff about getting the timber out by truck or railroad. That's his last card unless he can make friends with old Kerrick. That might worry us, but we'd still hold the cards. I can squeeze Kerrick if necessary."

A laugh came back over the wire, a low, satisfied sound, the laugh of one who stands well with his chief and knows a personal situation or two. "I guess you'll handle the Kerrick end all right and have a little fun in the bargain. No danger of Mrs. Carter and the kids coming West is there?"

"Not a chance—until I've sewed up this thing tight. Keep an eye on Kent as a matter of course. Good-bye, Gregg."

"S'long, Chief."

On the street another conversation was taking place. "The bluff didn't work, but I'm tackling Carter with confidence. He's tight and cheap. Did you notice his office furniture, dingy and old and he's worth a million!"

"Kept his desk clear though. No piled up papers."

"True, but I once knew a lazy man; his desk was always neat and clear, but he never did much save bang things around and make a bluff at being mighty busy. Sometimes a disorderly desk is a sign of hard work. Carter impressed me as a man who'd cleaned things up and was

waiting for the whistle to blow. Hope he keeps in that frame of mind, I've got to work overtime myself."

"What next?"

"I'm going to find out the second reason why I'm not likely to carry on the feud with Kerrick!"

Chapter III

AN ULTIMATUM FROM KERRICK

ASIDE from the logs in the dry river bed the camp itself was worth a fight. It stood in Kent's eyes as a monument to his father. About it he found a hundred personal signs. Everything was modern, typical of his father's methods. Cables swung between trees carried logs clear of obstructions instead of dragging them through brush and stumps by brute force. There was a loyalty on the crew's part that touched him. It was accorded him because he was his father's son. In time he hoped to merit it through association with them. He sensed they would tear down the dam if he gave the word. Kent walked among them and in time became personally acquainted with each. It was Mike Coyle who sensed there was a two-fold purpose in this. "You looking for someone?" he demanded.

"The night I came in I was attacked. It's just possible the men might be among the drifters who come and go," Kent explained.

"Ah, so they got after you, too. There's been a lot of beating up of peaceful citizens since your dad was killed. A timber cruiser was mighty near done for. Not one of our men, but a scout from some outfit that figured it might bid if this stand is sold. Several trout fishermen got it plenty. The sheriff, fire wardens, and myself investigated a bit, but found nothing."

"I've about decided none of these men had a hand in it." Kent's next movement took Coyle completely by surprise. He handed the foreman his pistol. "Keep this, Mike. I'm going to visit Kerrick this afternoon."

"Then you'd better take it with you."

"I'm afraid to, Mike. I'm hot tempered; and when I think of my father I get furious all over and want to kill. I plan to wrong no man so I'll just leave this behind when I see Kerrick. Later I may enter his land with a cocked rifle; but I don't want to be blinded by revenge at the start!"

"He'll kill you if he recognizes you."

"He doesn't know me and—I've got to see him for myself."

Mike watched his youthful employer swing along the trail, scramble across the boulder strewn bed and vanish in the shade of forbidden timber. "Maybe it's the best that he goes alone, but if he don't come back, I'll follow him and *I* won't go unarmed!"

AS KENT progressed the roar of his logging engines became fainter. Presently the ring of the axe echoed through the timber. Without warning he came upon a scene that stirred his love of the artistic to the depths. A small lake spread out at his feet; beyond that a house stood on a timbered knoll. Madroña and dogwood trees had been left for beauty and shade. Except for the sandy beach at the foot of the knoll the soil was a heavy, black loam. Thousands of lettuce plants were growing in neat rows. Here, evidently, was a man who came into possession of timber by chance, but was a farmer by preference.

The ringing of the axe had ceased as Kent emerged from the woods. Kerrick's keen ear had heard the other's approach, yet he looked down upon the lake with concern. The surface was unbroken except for a widening series of circles as if someone had tossed a stone into the water. Kent noticed the undercut in the tree first. It was clean, the work of a master woodsman. The axe seemed a toy in Kerrick's hands; his latent strength and litheness when he moved utterly belied the gray of his temples.

Suddenly a girl's head popped from the depths. She wore a tight fitting bathing cap and suit both modest and scant. As she crawl-stroked to the only rock protruding above the surface Kent experienced a lively appreciation of her skill. Here was a girl who was happy for the sheer joy of living; and a man who had built his home in a place of beauty, was content to live modestly rather than turn his strength to the mad scramble for wealth.

"I made it!" the girl called across the water.

"I see you did. Hang it all, Helen, I wish you wouldn't stay under so long. How do I know but what you're caught in weeds or something? Stick to your fancy diving, but stop that under water swimming."

The girl waved her hand, slipped from the rock and moved swiftly through the

water using the same crawl stroke. On the beach she shook herself and ran to the house. To Jack Kent it seemed regrettable for him to intrude on the peaceful scene, yet he stepped boldly toward Kerrick. "Good afternoon," he said.

"Howdy, young man, fine day!"

"It certainly is."

"It's always fine here! Ever seen a prettier spot? If you did I'd like to know where!" He stopped abruptly. "Your face seems familiar to me, but I can't quite place it. You must be some youngster grown up. I remember when my girl returned from school, she——"

He suddenly clenched his hands, advancing threateningly. *"I know you now!* I've never laid eyes on you till this minute, but you're Kent's son! They said he had one. You're Jack Kent! You've got just two minutes to get off this place!" So great was that sudden access of fury Jack Kent thanked his lucky star Kerrick had forgotten the double-bitted axe. "Helen!" Kerrick shouted, "Oh, Helen! My rifle! Quick!"

The girl had not changed her bathing suit, and responded almost instantly, thoroughly alarmed until she saw her father was in no immediate danger. Kent guessed she knew how to use the weapon from the ease with which she carried it. He looked from the girl to her father, but did not retreat. "Mr. Kerrick, I came in peace because I think our interests are one. I believe——"

"Clear out. I trusted the father once and I won't trust the son or any of the tribe of Kent! Your time is up. Helen, damn it, hurry with that rifle!" The girl was picking her way, barefooted, through a field of stubble. Kerrick ran to meet her. She seemed to understand the situation and her first words counseled calmness; but Kerrick was beside himself. It seemed incredible that one so peaceful on the surface could change to such violence in a twinkling.

"Please go!" the girl pleaded, still retaining the rifle, "Please, or there'll be trouble. Why did you come?"

"To straighten out this matter. We have nothing for which to fight each other. Our interests are common. Carter is the common enemy!"

Kerrick interrupted with a taunting laugh. "That's what the father said, and the son echoes him. I helped crush the father; now I'll crush the son!"

"You killed the father and you'd kill the son, you mean!" retorted Kent. In Kerrick's words he caught more than an inference the elder Kent had double-crossed him.

"That's a lie!" stated the girl in a low tone. It was evident she was high spirited and loyal to that which was hers. "Temper my father may have, but he has always warned every enemy and fought in the open." It was rather late in the season to be swimming, but she seemed unconscious of the cool wind that whipped about her wet suit.

"And I'm warning you that if you step on my property again I'll shoot on sight. Keep to your own side of the river!" shouted Kerrick.

Kent paused in his slow retreat. "I'll say one final word, Mr. Kerrick. I apologize for charging you with shooting my father. I don't believe you did it, though I intend to run down the man who did. But I'll apologize for no act he ever has committed, and I'll back up everything he ever did. I guess we understand each other thoroughly. Yet, let me say that sooner or later we must stand or fall together."

"You mean that unless you grab hold of something mighty quick *you're* going to fall!" shouted Kerrick. "Remember, leave me and mine alone or I'll kill you for the dog you are!"

Kent's last glimpse as he disappeared through the timber was of the girl calming her father, but still retaining the rifle.

The afternoon's adventure was not without result. He had maneuvered to depart the Kerrick property from the opposite side. It gave him an opportunity to familiarize himself once more with the topography of the country over which he had hunted as a youth. It gave him an insight into the comprehensiveness of Carter's plan. With water, or the lack of it he could bend an empire to his will. The ancient creek bed Kent followed was almost level. Before the river above the falls had worn down to the present channel, the creek undoubtedly had carried high water into the lake. With some dredging it could be made to carry water into the lake as storage; and when the water behind the dam was lowered the reserve in the lake would take care of needs for an indefinite period. Even raising the lake

as little as twenty-five feet would flood a great area. It could care for even a flood and prevent water going over the spillway and into the dry river bed wherein his logs waited to be floated to market!

Unless Carter could be attacked through some flaw in his legal armor his position was almost secure. Legal battles are drawn out affairs and long before attack in that line could succeed the Kent timber holdings would go under the hammer.

"I've got to make peace with Kerrick," Kent said thoughtfully, "and though Helen Kerrick's eyes were cold as an Arctic floe whenever she looked at me, just the same, success lies through her. She's one grand little second reason why I don't war in that direction." The more he studied the situation, the more a glimmering idea took form. "When the storm king battles in the peaks, men are going to battle here below," he promised. "A good, rip-roaring flood will force Carter's hand. Either he'll have to flood Kerrick's property and drown his precious lettuce beds or he'll have to float my timber down stream. This country never has known two consecutive dry seasons."

Kent struggled through the brush and up a low slope; the blue waters of the artificial lake spread out before him. The tops of firs and cedars broke through the water in scattered clumps where Carter's greed for wealth had prevented his clearing anything but merchantable timber. The stamp of a man who lived for self alone was on everything. Where the best was the cheapest in the end the best had been used, but otherwise the job had been slighted.

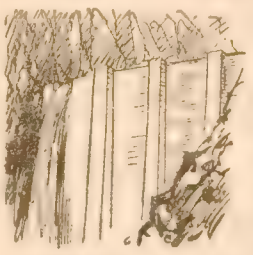
An armed watchman interrupted Kent's inspection. "You'll have to keep off without a permit!" he shouted.

"All right," Kent responded. "I just wondered if there was any trout fishing in here."

"There is for Carter, but none for his employes or anybody else," the watchman replied. "The lake's full of landlocked salmon."

Kent recalled the old fishway his father had built around the falls that spawning grounds for salmon might be greatly increased in the upper creeks. Leave it to Carter to keep the young salmon up above the dam when the instinct came that sends them downstream to the sea. The longer Kent remained in the vicinity the more grounds he found on which to meet the man in a finish fight. Yet invariably he returned to the only way promising victory —a great flood and the friendship of his father's blood enemy, Charley Kerrick. "Carter must regard his fishing pool highly to set an armed guard over it," Kent suggested.

"Huh!' ' The man's disgust at the question was obvious. "He's afraid of the Kent crowd touching off his dam."



"Hardly any such danger in this enlightened age," said Kent feeling out the other's opinion with the hope of getting a reflection of Carter's ideas on the matter.

"Don't fool yourself. Some people think working men are boobs. They're not! Down in that camp are some two-fisted birds who've figured this thing all out. Kent has treated 'em white. Carter won't. They know if Kent loses out Carter will take the camp over and the best they can expect is the worst of it. They know if the sheriff can't find out who murdered Buck Kent, nor who it is beats up innocent people wandering around in the woods he probably wouldn't have much luck finding out who jolted this concrete wedge with powder. And some of 'em are just game enough to try it. That's why I'm here." Kent was glad none of his men were within earshot of this frank watchman. "Well you'd better clear out or I'll be getting canned for not chasing you away. Carter and Gregg snoop a lot."

"S'long," responded Kent, "may be I'll show up some day with a permit to fish."

"Might bring along a good cigar," the watchman suggested.

"I'll do that, too," Kent promised.

While talking Kent had studied the situation from the lofty position of the dam. He returned to the camp well satisfied and with a definite plan in his mind. Mike smiled. "You're alive I see. Did you find the second reason? Sure you did, I can tell it by the smile of you. Huh! It kinda complicates things, eh?"

"Perhaps. And again, Miss Helen Kerrick may prove to be the key that unlocks the gate and releases the flood. I'm proceeding on that theory and I'm going to run up to Seattle tomorrow and argue with that banker again."

"And after that?" insisted Mike. Kent was so happy there must be a reason for it. His answer left the Irishman dumbfounded.

"We may mine a bit in that river bank, might find gold, coal, or——"

"If you'd mine a bit on that dam you'd strike water, Jack, all you've got to do is to say the word and the boys will start drilling of nights. And water's gold."

"It sure is. We'll get it!"

Chapter IV

FURY

WHEN the president of the City National Bank saw Jack Kent approaching his sanctum, he sighed, braced himself and took refuge behind the ample protection of a cold exterior.

Jack grinned. "I saw you don your armor," he challenged. "All bankers get that way. They have to. But listen to me, and then see if I can't prove by sound financial reasoning that I'm entitled to an extension." Jack talked at length and wasted a lot of fine stationery with diagrams.

Doubtful grunts changed slowly to grudging approval. A banker simply can't permit his enthusiasm to get away from him; if he did he wouldn't be a banker—long. "You expect me to extend time on any such wild notion as that?" he demanded.

"Certainly. You think it a fairly good idea; I know, because you haven't advanced arguments against it. Usually it's bad business to allow a banker time to think things over. When he does he says no! However, I'll be back in two days!"

The president tapped Kent on the knee. "If you bring a memo or agreement, sworn to before a notary and signed by Charles Kerrick to that effect, I'll give you the extension, and advance you the necessary funds."

"Fair enough!" Jack Kent departed. Outside with the cold air blowing on his enthusiastic brow a glimmering of sound reasoning returned to him. "Imagine Charley Kerrick signing on the dotted line to save me when my downfall will be a sweet sight to him! But I've got to tackle it. I'll talk to Helen first. If I can get her to listen, perhaps—in the meantime we'll keep right on mining."

It required but twenty-four hours to convince Gregg and Carter that Kent had no intention of constructing either a rail or a truck road into camp. But the atmosphere of confidence in the Kent camp set the pair to thinking. Carter moved into Gregg's cottage and spent his time fishing and keeping within striking distance of Kerrick's farm. He could think of no possible escape aside from what the law terms an "act of God." That must be, in this instance, a flood. In that case some water might go over the dam, but he would see to it that it was not sufficient to float more than a log or two even if he had to send a quantity through the extra tunnel and waste it in the South Fork.

Thus it was when Kent set forth in the hope of meeting Helen Kerrick, either Carter or Gregg usually was in the vicinity. On such occasions they took good care not to be observed. Three mornings passed without result, but on the fourth morning the girl saddled her horse and when but a short distance from her home was surprised to find Kent standing in the middle of the road. Carter waited just long enough to see the girl cover Kent with a pistol, then he legged it for the Kerrick home where he arrived somewhat breathlessly.

Kerrick was at work in his garden as usual. He glanced up curiously. Carter's insistence that he sell his holdings to him was getting to be an old story. "Made peace with the enemy, eh?" Carter queried, "I'm surprised!"

Into the calm blue eyes came a strange glint. "Made peace with the enemy?" repeated Kerrick, questioningly.

"Coming over the ridge I was surprised to see Jack Kent waiting by the roadside. He was on what I thought forbidden ground. Of course, Mr. Kerrick, I have declared my interest in Helen, though our friendship hasn't reached the point where I can dictate her actions, but I don't like her meeting a fellow of Kent's type."

"Meeting *Kent,* did you say?" shouted Kerrick.

"I thought you had made peace, perhaps." Carter watched Kerrick closely. The seeds of suspicion he had sowed were scattered on far richer soil than the black loam beneath their feet.

Kerrick raced to the house, entered the front door and emerged from the back, rifle in hand. "This feud sha'n't touch my little girl," he cried, "I'll wipe him out. Women are weak at times, and the devil is handsome." He made for the only open spot that commanded a view of the road. Carter remained where he was. He had no wish to be a witness, for in this act of Kerrick's two birds were to fall before one stone.

The father became deadly cool as he emerged into the open, but in an instant he blazed up with renewed fury. All he saw

was his daughter facing the common enemy with drawn pistol. This was no meeting of lovers, but a girl keeping a man at bay! Kerrick did not give the warning he had planned, but raised the rifle to his shoulder with a quick movement, and fired. "The son perishes as did the father," he muttered.

The terrible impact of the bullet knocked Jack Kent to the earth. The girl's horse reared so violently she was all but unseated. With a cry of alarm she looked first at her grim father on the ridge, then at the silent man at her feet. She saw blood flowing from a wound in little pulsating floods that reminded her of a tide claiming the beach. She was deathly white, but calm as she leaped from the saddle. Kerrick approached slowly.

"Oh, father!" she cried.

"Yes, Helen. He hadn't harmed you. I was afraid."

"He wasn't *trying* to! He was talking earnestly about his timber. He's fighting the fight of his life to hold that which is his, and everything is against him." A moment before she had listened to Kent's words unmoved, now she was confirming them. "You misunderstood."

"But the gun in your hand?"

"I'd forgotten I had it. There's been so many things said of him, I regarded him as something—a beast, perhaps." As she talked she was tearing Kent's shirt into strips in an attempt to bandage the wound and stop the flow of blood. "Call the doctor, dad, before we have to call the coroner and sheriff."

For reasons he did not understand Kerrick obeyed. From the ridge Carter saw him approaching and returned to his horse. "The doctor!" panted Kerrick. "Ride like the devil!"

"Sure!" Carter galloped away at breakneck speed, but the moment he was out of sight he slowed to a walk. A wounded man, cared for by a pretty girl, offered an unpleasant possibility if—the wounded man lingered too long or recovered.

Kerrick returned. "Carter's gone for the doctor," he announced, "he'll ride to his plant and telephone."

Jack Kent was mumbling. "Didn't think you'd shoot, Helen. You looked calm—unafraid, but you shot—I—harm—I can't get up. Legs—dead."

"He thinks I shot him," she cried, "he mustn't die thinking that." She twisted her clenched hands as if in her anguish to bring him to complete consciousness. "How did you know he was here?"

"Carter saw him."

"Carter, eh? Always Carter either in the foreground or background of everything. He has been wonderful to me, but I can't forget his snaky eyes."

"I'll get some help and we'll have Kent carried to his camp!"

"Not the camp, but our cottage. Carrying him far would be fatal. He may die any minute. Why doesn't the doctor come? Why?"

She was stirred to the depths by the deathly white of a face that but a few minutes before had glowed with life. In consciousness a face can be masked with smiles and cover deceitfulness and the crassness of trickery, but when death hovers near the mantle is stripped aside for the world to see. All that was good and clean in young manhood the girl saw in Kent's face. Invisible cords seemed drawing her near him, while her barriers crashed one before the other. "Why doesn't the doctor——?"

"He can't get here for hours," said Kerrick, "we'll have to get this young man to the house."

The clumping of heavy boots broke the momentary stillness of the woods. Mike Coyle came into view. He was running low, keeping as much timber between himself and Kerrick as possible and he carried a rifle. Kerrick lifted his own weapon, but the girl thrust it aside and stepped between Coyle and her father. "There has been enough bloodshed," she said firmly, "There will be no more. Drop the rifle, Mr. Coyle."

"I'll be dropping no rifle to be slayed in cold blood as the father and the son were! Shot from the brush!"

"I never shot the father," shouted Kerrick. "I wish I had, but I got the son."

"And if he dies I'll get you. That's a promise. If the lad dies, you follow him. Now I'll leave him in the hands of the likes of you, trusting God will protect him, and when I come, I'll bring me boys to carry him tenderly to friends, or to give him a decent burial. I'm promising before God to settle with you, Kerrick!"

"I'll answer, Coyle. Get your men. I don't want him here!"

"Stop! Between you, you'll kill him. I'll care for him!" The girl's eyes blazed furiously at Coyle, and into his came the suggestion of a twinkle.

"I was wondering, Miss Helen how to reach the heart of you. I'll leave him with you, till I return." Coyle turned his back and clumped away at a trot through the timber.

While he was gone Kerrick and Helen carried Jack Kent to the cottage. The reaction of his blind fury had left Kerrick thoughtful. The man cared for but one thing in the world—his daughter. He wondered if the sight of blood he had drawn had lowered him in her estimation. He told himself repeatedly that he had justification, yet always there was a feeling that he had made a grave mistake. He made no effort to flee. If Kent died there would be a trial, of course.

While Kerrick reflected and Mike Coyle hurried for sufficient men to carry Kent back to camp, Carter arrived at the power plant. He was afoot and covered with dust. Gregg eyed his chief curiously and the chief winked. "Remember I was thrown from my horse and arrived here afoot, dirty and breathless."

"I can remember anything that's necessary. What's the idea? You look more like you'd rolled in the dust than been thrown."

"'Phone the doctor, Kerrick has shot young Kent. They sent me on the run and I'd have arrived sooner but for the unfortunate incident of being thrown."

"I see the idea. Well I can take my time about it."

"No, we don't want it to look too raw."

Gregg 'phoned, then added by way of observation. "Bad business to leave a pretty girl caring for a good looking man.

It'll kill your chances, Carter!"

"I'm not sure but I've already killed my chances. Something about the way I look at her makes her squirm. I've seen it. I wish I could make Kerrick squirm the same way. However, no danger of a romance. Mike Coyle won't let Kent remain there in the enemy's hands, nor will Kerrick permit the enemy to remain under his roof. The main thing, Kent is out of the fight."

The reasoning was good, but Carter had overlooked one important angle—Jack Kent.

Mike Coyle and his huskies arrived before the doctor. There was a clashing of eyes when the men saw Kerrick, but the man's courage was equal to the occasion. He never flinched, nor backed down. Mike kept his men in check. Kent was conscious, but his mind was somewhat hazy. Mike bent low. "Jackie me boy, I'm here with the lads to take you home."

"Wait until the doctor comes," whispered Kent. "He'll know what's best."

When the doctor did arrive he proved to be so youthful that he still wore a college fraternity pin. Coyle sized him up as a young man trying to get along and picking up some mighty good practice in logging camps. "I shall have to get you to a hospital some way," he announced.

Kent nodded. "Tell the boys to leave the room; I want to be told just how much chance I have."

The room cleared magically, except for Helen Kerrick hovering near the door. The young doctor looked professional, but it was Kent who spoke. "I see we belong to the same frat, doctor, so I'll fall back on the old bond of brotherly love stuff. Regardless of my condition you're to announce that it would be fatal to move me. I've the fight of my life before me, and here's the spot I can best carry it on. Understand?"

The doctor nodded, examined and bandaged the wound, complimented Helen on her skill in rendering first aid, then cleared his throat. "The patient is in a very serious condition. I can assure complete recovery only if he remains undisturbed. I shall call daily."

Chapter V

Mike Coyle Gets His Orders

WHEN they had a moment alone Kent gave Mike Coyle certain directions. "What, me talk to a banker?" the latter gasped.

"I can't; you've *got* to!"

"I'd sooner talk to a lot of roughnecks with a pickhandle. However you're the boss. Now what about our mining operations?"

"Keep 'em moving and be sure you're not caught at it. Kerrick could stop it by injunction if he caught on. We may never need it, but if we do, it is to be my ace in

the hole." Kent slumped back on the pillow suddenly tired. Mike stole softly from the room, gathered his men together and headed for camp leaving his employer entirely happy in the enemy's hands.

The following day Mike Coyle visited Seattle. After floundering around the City National Bank, he at length located the president's office. When a visitor slipped out, Mike slipped in—ahead of several big business men. Mike's neck wasn't used to a white collar and he kept stretching as if to see over the top.

"I'm Jack Kent's man," he announced, "and I'm begging you for a bit of an extension of time on them notes. The boy is bound to win out now."

"Kerrick signed, did he?"

"No, Kerrick shot Jack and the lad is now being nursed to health by none other than Helen Kerrick. I wanted to move him to the camp but he wouldn't hear to it, said he could get in some good licks while on the flat of his back if he was left right where he was. Do you get the idea or are you as dense as I was at the time?" Mike grinned so cheerfully the sting of his words was removed.

The president smiled and spoke rapidly. Mike was moved to thump him on the back. "You're a fine man," he announced, "and I'll hurry back to Jack Kent and tell him you'll recommend an extension to the directors."

Mike's voice was made for a logging camp and not the quiet dignity of a banking house. His words were audible to several men waiting. One of them hurriedly left the institution and entered the nearest telephone booth. He called Carter's office and asked for his private secretary. "Get in touch with Carter," he directed, "tell him Kent is to be granted an extension of time on his notes. If this matter goes into winter Kent may get out from under! The directors will meet next Friday. What the president recommends usually is confirmed."

The message had a double effect on Carter. He 'phoned his banker first. "Have available sixty thousand dollars," he directed. "Give you first mortgage on my power plant." He did not wait to explain. The plant was clear and there would be no trouble in borrowing that amount. Then he hurried down to Kerrick's farm. "How's the patient?"

"About the same!"

"Kerrick doesn't it occur to you that perhaps he's bluffing, to be near your girl? If he could win and break her heart it would be sweet revenge indeed!"

"If I thought he would, I'd go in there now and finish him. But he looks clean, and he's forgiven me."

"Rats, Kerrick, you're a fool. Have you forgotten the stories of his escapades in New York? Do you think that sort of a fellow would forgive a personal injury? Get him out if you are wise! That's a straight tip!"

"Did you come to tell me that?" demanded Kerrick.

"No. I came to offer you a hundred thousand dollars for your holdings, with a good substantial cash payment." Carter gave him time to consider that before proceeding.

Kerrick shook his head. "No, money is not my goal in life. I want to raise better lettuce than anybody else in the world. To excel at one thing, to live in peace. This place is more than a means of livelihood it's life itself. Isn't it beautiful with the sun shining on the waters of the lake and over there where the trees are mirrored?"

Carter shrugged his shoulders impatiently. "I've tried to make you listen to reason," he snarled. "Now if I have to show my teeth I shall do so. I've offered you a big price and you know it. Now think this over! Suppose I tell the sheriff you shot Buck Kent."

"That's a lie!"

"Now hold on! Gregg and I saw the affair. You had Kent covered because you didn't trust him after the time he sniped you in the woods. Your rifle went off accidentally; that's the way it looked to us. Wasn't that it? Think it over, and let me know about it."

Any but a strong man would have weakened. Kerrick advanced toward Carter. His hands were clenched, he was shaking with fury. "That's why I hate business," he cried, "for the club it uses to get its ends. I want peace and happiness within my home and about it, and I'll have it if I have to *kill!* Get out!"

When he had gained the safety of his own property Carter paused for reflection. "The lash is the one thing a dog understands. I've got to have Kerrick's lake before the floods come—and I'll have it."

Gregg was surprised at his sudden re-

turn. "Figured you were on your way to block that extension of time."

"I was and am, but I've got to crack the whip over Kerrick's head. The man's love of his damned lake and home outweighs his judgment. We've got to bring him to time. Let's tell the sheriff our story. Before that lettuce-head squirms from the law's clutches he'll sell his lake for a song."

"Do you dare, Chief? We've buzz saws enough around here."

"I dare anything to win an empire of timber. Are you weakening?"

"Not so you could notice it!"

Chapter VI

CARTER ATTACKS

HELEN KERRICK stepped to the door and called her father. "Mr. Kent wishes to talk to you."

Kerrick drove his axe into the undercut and hurried to the cottage. "Yes, Kent?"

"You don't need to leave, Miss Helen," said Kent as the girl moved to close the door. "You both are interested in this. Kerrick, I want to buy your lake!"

"My lake?"

"Yes!"

"But I don't want to sell my timber or lake. We have enough, Helen and I, so why should we seek more than enough?" Kerrick spoke slowly as if considering.

"It's too bad more people don't take that stand. Enough should be plenty. It would save strife, but in my case I am battling for what little I have. Because you are satisfied with things as they are Carter can't beat you, but he has me all but beaten, and the only immediate way out is your lake or a storm."

"I don't understand."

"Briefly I can dam the North Fork, drain your lake into the river bed, float my timber, and blow up the dam. Out goes the timber and I'm on my feet again."

Kerrick shook his head pleadingly. "Don't force me into it, Kent," he begged. "I refused Carter, but it's hard to refuse you when you're fighting with your back to the wall, particularly when it is I who laid you low. My lake! It's beautiful!"

"I'd give you additional area for lettuce!" suggested Kent.

"But the water would be gone. There'd be muck and green slimy pools where now all is beauty! But, Kent if you say——"

"No, Kerrick, you're right, I won't put it up to you. I won't win that way. Let's forget it, but you might send for Mike Coyle."

"I'll hail him from the timber. You've forgiven me, but I doubt if some of your hot-headed men have." Kerrick paused on the rambling porch that extended the length of the cottage and looked across the lake. "No, I couldn't destroy that," he whispered. "Anything but that!"

He hardly had disappeared into the timber before the sheriff appeared. He was not expecting trouble, but as he approached the cottage from in front two deputies came from the timber on either side. "Is your father in?" he inquired of Helen.

A shade of worry passed over Helen Kerrick's face. "No, and I don't know just when he will be back."

"Then we'll wait." He glanced toward the deputies. "Come in to the house, boys, out of sight."

The girl turned to the only person present. "What can it mean?" she whispered.

"Perhaps you had better warn him and let him use his own judgment," Kent suggested.

She nodded, but the sheriff stopped her a few yards from the cottage. "You'll remain here, Miss Kerrick, until your father returns."

Minutes dragged slowly, each one recorded by a solemn "tock-tock" of the old fashioned clock. It was maddening. The sheriff and deputies smoked continuously. Toward evening Kerrick emerged from the woods. He came straight to the house except for a brief glance at the timber mirrored in the lake. The sheriff stirred and leaned toward one of his deputies. "Watch young Kent. He's under the spell of the girl's beauty now, but when he learns the truth—well, we don't want another murder added. Be ready to grab him if necessary."

The sheriff stood up and nodded greetings. Kerrick neither seemed to be surprised nor did he make any move to draw a weapon. "Mr. Kerrick, I am here for the purpose of serving a warrant charging you with the murder of Buck Kent. Examine it if you wish. It is signed by two men who witnessed the crime."

"Witnessed the crime, did you say?" Jack Kent half leaped from the bed. The deputy pushed him back gently.

"Yes, Kent," answered the sheriff, "they appeared yesterday afternoon, late."

Helen Kerrick stood as if ready to at-

tack the big man who had arrested her father. "It's not true," she choked. "It's not true, *is* it, Daddy?"

"No, Helen, it is not true. I knew it was coming, though. I had plenty of chance to escape."

She did not cry, her grief and surprise was too great for that. She walked slowly toward Kent and looked down upon him. "Do you believe it?" she demanded. Her voice was almost threatening. "Do you believe it?" she repeated.

"What were the circumstances, Mr. Sheriff?"

"The witnesses state Mr. Kerrick shot your father from ambush."

"When they put it that way, sir, I don't believe it. Mr. Kerrick will shoot, as I have cause to know, but not from ambush." He turned to Helen. "That's my answer."

The girl restrained her impulse to hug Kent at his tribute. Instead she turned to the sheriff. "Who were the supposed witnesses?"

Kerrick answered. "Carter and Gregg, Helen."

The sheriff took due notice. This was almost a confession.

The girl said, "Oh. Carter and Gregg!" Her lips curled scornfully. Then she put on her hat and coat. "I'll go with you, Dad, and help arrange bail."

"Bail for first degree murder?" asked the sheriff. "Hardly!"

Mike Coyle arrived just as the party left. "You'll have to care for him, Mr. Coyle, until I return," said the girl quickly, "I must stick pretty close to dad now!"

Mike waited until they were alone before he spoke his mind to his employer. "Well, they've got the cuss at last. I should think Carter would thank Kerrick for removing a hard fighter from his path instead of squealing on him."

"The fact that Carter and Gregg are doing the squealing clears Kerrick in my mind. Besides he's an out in the open fighter. Mike, how's the mine coming?"

"We've driven a tunnel almost under Kerrick's lake." Coyle winked. "And nary a sign of coal!"

"Much seepage?"

"Quite a bit the last two days."

"Then stop the tunnel and throw a dirt dam across the river bed. That'll give the enemy something to think about. They won't understand it. Now if we only get that extension on the notes!"

"It's as good as granted, if the president is a man of his word," replied Coyle. "Any more orders!"

"None, except you'd better remain with me until Helen returns. It wouldn't look right for a badly wounded man to be left alone."

"Sure," agreed Mike and lighted his pipe.

SETTING the law in motion against Kerrick was move number one. The second act was to hurry to Seattle and block any extensions on Kent's notes. Carter knew better than to approach the bank president directly in the matter. Instead, he made an investment that he long had contemplated. He bought a good block of stock in the City National Bank and the directorship that went with it. Next he sent a young attorney, Dutro, to Kerrick. "Your business is to make him listen to reason," instructed Carter, "if he'll sell us his lake and remember he's carrying sentiment too far when he lets it interfere with business, then on the date of trial our testimony will be such that his lawyer can rip it to shreds. That means a verdict of not guilty. On the other hand, if he remains stubborn we'll go the limit." Dutro hastened to carry out his chief's orders.

He barely had left the office when the telephone rang. Gregg was on the wire. "Something is up, Carter. They've stopped logging down at Kent's and the gang is throwing a dirt dam across the river bed."

"Keep your eye on things, but don't let it worry you. I once told Kent to pray for rain. He's hoping a few drops will go over the spillway and figures that all in one pool they might move his timber. Well, they might, but not as much as one drop of water is coming over the spillway. What's the latest on the Kerrick matter?"

"He's out on bail. Had to put up most of his timber land. What are we going to do about that?" Gregg was worried.

"I've got Dutro on the job; he's clever. Kerrick will be eating from our hands within a week. Can't talk longer; I'm off to attend a director's meeting." Carter hung up the telephone and slipped down to the City National. Several of the directors greeted him pleasantly. The others were introduced, and a place made for him at the table.

"Mr. Carter has purchased a large block

of stock," the vice-president explained, "and is to be seated at Benson's place henceforth."

The president viewed the gathering from his private office. He rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "Carter is there and I'm not surprised. I am due in three minutes, but before I enter I think I shall dictate a letter." He called his stenographer and dictated:

> Dear Mr. Kent:
>
> You are hereby notified that you are granted an extension of time of sixty days on the notes we hold, signed by your father.

"Bring it to me immediately, Miss Underwood I'll sign it and you are to see that it is registered and mailed at once." The president chuckled. "In all his moves Carter has made but one mistake. That's buying stock in this institution. But he hasn't found that out yet. Now to inform him!"

He lingered just long enough to sign the letter, then hurried into the director's room. "Sorry to hold up the meeting gentlemen, but I was detained on an important matter." He took his seat and the usual business came before the board. This over with he took up a matter dear to his heart, but he repressed a smile.

"As I have done at different times in the past when a matter was urgent I acted myself, and now wish my act confirmed by the Board. Mr. Kent applied for an extension of time on his notes. This I granted."

"I move the matter be approved," began a director.

Carter was on his feet. "I don't wish to appear in the light of a trouble maker," he said, "but I question the wisdom of granting an extension of time. Mr. Kent is unable to float his logs to market through shortage of water and it seems to me that every day this matter hangs over, our security will become that much less in value. I move the extension be recalled."

All eyes were upon the president. Each member was familiar with the situation. "Now that Mr. Carter is one of us," he said sweetly, "it is not likely he will be too hard on the bank and incidentally himself. If worse comes to worse, the Kent holdings are either sold or taken over by the bank and we need water to float our logs to market. I considered this in granting the extension."

Carter blinked in sudden surprise. He had been outmaneuvered and he knew it. He listened in silence as the president's action was confirmed. Then he left the meeting and retired to his office. He was worried. If he had slipped up on this matter, perhaps there were others equally important that he had overlooked. He examined each angle of the situation carefully. "Even with the extension, I've got him," he mused, "but I've got to have Kerrick's lake." Rather hurriedly he called his attorney on the telephone. This brilliant soul made a good living by using his head and pointing out loopholes in the law, or digging up ancient laws to cover different cases. The finest legal smokescreen in the world is a forgotten law. "If my dam should overflow and run down that old creek bed into Kerrick's lake what'll happen?"

"Water has a right to follow an ancient water course, Mr. Carter. However their comeback would be it was your dam that caused it. At most you might have to pay for a few lettuce plants. In any event you would not have to pay for sentimental damage. Besides I can tangle the affair up so he'll be glad to settle for a song. By the way I thought you had as good as bought that lake?"

"I have, but if something slips up, I want to know where I'm going to dump excess water. It's a cinch it isn't going over the spillway!"

"Go the limit, Carter, I'll get you out of trouble!"

Carter felt better as he hung up. "All the loose ends are picked up now. Kent's flat on his back; Kerrick is charged with murder, and I'm sitting pretty. God Almighty couldn't beat me!"

Late summer vanished while Kent was still in bed. Then came a cold fall. What Kent had prayed for was heavy warm rains that would have filled the watercourses to their banks and spilled a flood over the dam. Snow lay deep in the mountains and even on the foothills. The lake behind the dam was low. Fate was against him. Yet he refused to admit defeat, and his refusal in a way heartened Kerrick. The erstwhile enemies were slowly but surely drawn together.

"I may have to sell," Kerrick admitted, "but if I do I'll give you every drop of water in the lake. One of us will have to win this fight. They say right triumphs, but I'm beginning to doubt it, now. Gregg and Carter are going to send me over for killing your father. The people are saying so; even my own lawyer has searched in vain for grounds of reasonable doubt.

It's just my word. I'd give in to Dutro's advice and sell, but it goes against the grain to admit that wrong can win."

"We're neither down nor out, Kerrick. I'm going to ask for another extension tomorrow."

"If it'll help you get it, I'll give you an agreement that if rains don't come before the time expires my lake will carry your logs to market!"

"No. I once had that in mind, but that lake helped me recover, gave me a different viewpoint. I'm fighting for it, too, now!"

Chapter VII

A REQUEST REFUSED

SOMEWHAT pale and unsteady, Jack Kent appeared before the board of directors. For the first time in weeks he once more faced Carter. The man was most polite, except perhaps for a glint of triumph deep in his snaky eyes. Even this was masked. The board listened to the request in respectful silence.

It was apparent Carter already had put in good licks in certain quarters. His move was a grandstand play pure and simple. "I decline to vote on this request," he announced, "simply because there is a feeling in many quarters that I am making war on Mr. Kent. On any other matter I'll gladly take a stand, but on this I must be excused either from voting or expressing an opinion."

It sounded fine, but Kent knew it was Carter speaking through a friend's mouth when another director stood up. "I think Mr. Carter's attitude very fair. Mr. Kent has been granted one extension, but has failed to make use of the extra time. He is in the same position he was two months ago. I believe we should consider the interests of the bank first, and move the request be denied."

Kent thanked them when he left several minutes later with a heavy heart, and headed for camp. Somehow he did not stay long, but slipped across the river. Helen Kerrick met him on the lake shore. "You're feverish!" she exclaimed, "you've overdone things today."

"No, I'm not feverish; I'm just warm." He shed his coat and the wind rippled his shirt sleeves. The girl did not like it. This was dangerous, though the day did seem warm. Great cloud banks were rolling in from the south, the sun peered through a rift just before setting. Kerrick puffed silently at his pipe. He seemed strangely at ease for one with a charge hanging over his head. Kent eyed him sharply. "You seem at peace with the world."

"Not with the world so much as with myself. I have won a great moral victory over myself. I have not yielded to weakness. Today I told Dutro to go to hell and carry the same word to Carter. I'll face the jury and see if twelve men and women can't hear a strange story and decide whether it is truthful or false. I'll tell of an argument your father and I once had. He wanted me to go in with him and laughed at my love of my trees and lake. I'll tell of the high words that passed between us for we were both hot tempered men. Later I was shot at from the brush and I believed he did it. Now since knowing you I am sure that he did not. I'll tell them of seeing him coming one day and covering him as he came down the trail. We once had fired at each other across the river bed and had parted with a promise to finish it next time. Then my rifle went off, perhaps because of my tense emotion. Then Gregg and Carter came. Do you think a jury will believe that story?"

Kent believed it, but a jury with a lawyer to point out the glaring faults of such a tale might doubt it. A patter of rain struck his cheek.

"Come in, it's raining." Helen Kerrick stood up suddenly.

"Let's stay out in it and get wet," re-

plied Kent half in earnest. Nevertheless he got up and entered the cottage. He had not intended remaining all right, but he noticed the room that had sheltered him during his slow recovery from the flesh wound, had been prepared.

The pattering of the rain on the roof was sweet music. It was steady, but it would take more than that to float a log. Presently Kent slept. It was a restful sleep, free from worry; the message of the rain made it so. Maybe if the dam was filled he could get enough water behind his own dirt dam to put his logs, or some of them at least, within striking distance of the main river.

And as Kent dreamed, Carter was tearing through the night over slippery pavements and muddy roads to take personal charge of the situation at the power plant. Gregg was rounding up a rough and ready crew to stand by if needed. Lastly, a grumbling lawyer had routed out a peevish judge and secured an injunction against interference on Kerrick's part with any water that might decide to follow an ancient course——

Mike Coyle, stumbling through the wet woods, pounded heavily at the door. "Hey, Jackie me boy, 'tis a grrraand night. Come out of that sleep, 'tis time to be up and about! Shake your lazy bones and come out and see the fun. It's myself that slipped up to the dam and she'll be going over the spillway in another hour."

Jack Kent appeared at the door, blinking sleepily. "The dam," he muttered. "Full!"

"Pretty near, and the storm just starting! Didn't you feel the hot wind last night? It's a chinook and a grrraand one if forty years in the Puget Sound country means anything. She'll spill warm water on deep snow, and bridges will go this night!"

Kerrick joined them, and Helen proved that the old saw about women dressing slow was unfounded by appearing completely dressed a moment later. A man, his "tin" pants and cruiser shirt drenched, appeared. He reported to Coyle. "I've sneaked down to the power plant. They've got everything going at top speed, using all the water they can, even the extra tunnel is discharging enough alone to give us a little lake behind our dirt dam."

"The devil!" gritted Coyle. "But even his damn dam and his damn tunnels won't care for *this* flood! Get back to the camp and tell the boys to be ready with their poles and peavies; there's a fortune in logs going to tidewater tonight. Hurry up. You might tell the two-fisted lads to be ready for a bit of a shindy. My bones tell me there'll be fighting of sorts."

The four hurried to the river bed. The armed guard kept them away from the dam proper. With eager eyes they watched for the first foamy wave to clear the top. In the distance the camp had suddenly come to life. Shouts came through the rain, rubber clad figures hurried about. Carter might whip mankind by his trickery but he could not stem the wrath of the elements. Occasionally they cheered.

Kerrick suddenly cast aside his calmness and yelled like a madman. "You've won, boy, you've won!"

A wave cascaded down the concrete mass and spilled into the granite hole. Then more and more until the deluge came with a roar. The pool filled and the advance guard gurgled among the boulders, while sands long dry drank gratefully. Above on the concrete they could see men hurrying about in the gray dawn. "Carter's up there, and he's a madman!" cried Kerrick above the roar of water.

A relayed shout came from down the river. The first water had reached the dirt dam and more was coming. Then, even as they watched the flood ceased, died to a tiny stream and stopped entirely. They waited. No man could stop the onrush of water coming from the mountains. It must come again, with renewed force, once it overcame the obstacle.

It was Kerrick who spoke, aghast. "Has the cur triumphed in the showdown?" he cried.

"I know the answer!" replied Kent. He looked at Mike Coyle. "Get your men, with picks and shovels. The fight is on! We're going to send water over that spillway again!"

As they gained the bluff overlooking the stream a dull roar came to their ears. "The old creek behind the cottage!" shouted Kerrick. "It hasn't carried water in years."

"Carter's diverting the water into the creek and lake!" explained Kent. "That's how he is cheating me!"

For the first time Kerrick swore. "Bring on your men, Mike," he called over his shoulder. "We're fighting with right on our side and on our own property. Carter can't beat that!"

"Comin'!" yelled Mike gleefully. He only hoped Carter or Gregg would be in the affair personally.

A TORRENT of water was sweeping through the old creek bed; it would continue until the lake level had been raised to the level of the dam. For some distance from the shore the crystal blue waters were muddy and the line of muddy water steadily was crawling outward. The first row of lettuce plants already was submerged. Water would be in the house itself unless the flow was checked.

The crowd of loggers charged through the brush with picks and shovels, ready to topple a high bank into the creek and stop the flow, or perhaps attack it at the point of the dam itself. Mike Coyle sighted the enemy and from his joyous lungs came the cry of battle. The group on the dam was armed with rifles, which they promptly leveled. Kent thrust Helen behind a tree then joined Kerrick and Coyle. The men waited. They were in a mood to charge rifles if need be.

"Mr. Kerrick! Mr. Kerrick!" The voice had a familiar ring of authority. "Kerrick, come forward alone. The others stay where they are, my men are armed."

Kerrick recognized the sheriff and behind stood Carter and Gregg. "Yes, sheriff!"

"You are enjoined from interfering with this water in any way, manner, or form." The sheriff read the injunction by aid of a flashlight.

"That's not justice," Kerrick protested. "A man can protect his own property and by heaven, I'll protect mine!"

"There'll be bloodshed if you attempt it. I have no choice in this matter. I'm obeying the law and carrying out an order of the court. If you are damaged you have recourse against Carter; but this injunction stands until dissolved."

Carter smiled! He had his grip upon Kerrick and Kent now, had them right where he wanted them. It was his moment! Mike Coyle and the men gathered in a group. "We'll rush 'em and we'll get water!" he declared. "Are you with me! They've got guns and somebody will be hurt, but there's only a few and——"

"We are with you!" The crowd advanced and it was Kent who stepped between officers and the enraged loggers.

"We can't beat the law, boys—here! Go back; I'll join you in a moment!" He stepped around the sheriff and approached Carter. "Twice I've come to you. Now you will come to me and *when* you come, prepare to put your promises down in black and white! That's the only language you know."

"It is one language that makes itself plain," Carter answered jeeringly.

Chapter VIII

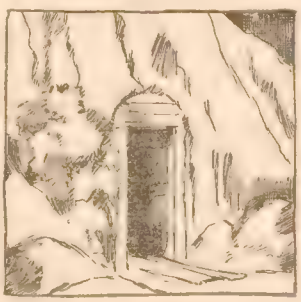
KENT PLAYS AN ACE

KERRICK, I'm sorry, but your lake is gone either way, but we can save part of your farm and your house!"

Kent led the way to the tunnel his men had labored on and privately called a coal mine. "A charge of powder will break up the lake bottom and send the water through the tunnel. It'll rip and tear things, because unleased water is a fiend, but it's the only way out. I planned to use it at a last resort, either to beat Carter or in case you sold me the lake at the last minute. Shall we touch off a blast?"

"Yes, beat him!"

"Mike!" But Mike already was gone, carrying a box of dynamite in his arms as he entered the tunnel.



He emerged from the tunnel with such speed, that he had to grab a sapling to keep from going below. On his heels came a torrent of mud, mixed fairly evenly with whel barrow, picks, shovels, and bars. The mass shot into a beautiful arc and landed in the river bed below!

Mike himself was deathly white, but grinning. "Holly St. Patrick!" he panted. "That was close! I'd just got in there and put down the box when a section caved away; and with that I legged it out. Wheelbarrows and tools were right behind me. The pressure of the extra water must have started things."

As the flood tore through the tunnel it increased and widened the bore until sections of the forest floor fell in. The roar was tremendous! Men stood close to each other and shouted, in order to make themselves understood. Mike Coyle had recovered from his mad flight. "It's a grrraaand sight, but I'd liked it better with a bit of a shindy thrown in. I've stood a lot that can only be settled with fists," he chuckled.

The watchman on the concrete dam was amazed to see water working up the river bed lifting logs clear of boulders until the surface was dotted, resembling a giant

basin covered with toothpicks. He legged it at top speed for Carter.

Water pressure had widened the gap above the old creek considerably and sections of bank were caving off to be sucked away in a twinkling. Gregg was pale. "If that lake doesn't fill quick and even things up, this is liable to get away from us," he shouted. "Look it was even with the spillway and now it's six inches below, that's a pile of water with this area!"

The watchman shouted as he ran. "They're floating timber! They've got water!"

"What?"

"It's gushing from the bank, a river of it! That must be that coal mine they talked about!"

"A tunnel under the lake! Gad, man, there'll be hell to pay. "They're mad!" Carter turned to Gregg. "Get a gang together! Every available man. Men that'll fight and work!"

He had lost in his attempt to take an empire of timber by force. More, he knew that Kerrick was within his legal rights in protecting his property from flooding. There would be no mounting lake to stop the flow as he had planned. Every gallon of water behind his dam was seeking escape. Only when the earth had been worn to bed rock would the widening hole stop and hold. Carter ran headlong across Kerrick's property until he found the group on the river bank. "Stop it, Kerrick! You'll drown the lower country!"

"It needs it!" Kent answered the statement. "The river banks are steep and there's no flat country to flood. This old stream empties into the Sound; and she's emptying a lot of logs today."

"You cur!" shouted Kerrick, "Get off my land!"

Carter pleaded, then threatened. No one paid any attention to him. The scene below was too interesting. He hurried back to the dam. Mike Coyle trailed along hopefully, but returned on the run. "Kent, there's the divil to pay. The whole dam will be into the Sound before night. He's got a gang working on the bluff trying to stop the water in the creek bed."

"My property, eh?" snapped Kerrick. "He'll get off. By his infernal injunction he stopped me from interfering with him. It's a poor rule that won't work both ways."

Mike turned to his gang. "You squareheads spoiling for a fight just follow your Uncle Dudley, and don't stop until every last Carter man is on his own property!" Mike led the charge. Nor did he pause even when he sighted the enemy. If anything, he increased his speed. Gregg alone interested him. The grunts and shouts of the struggling men, the smacking impact of fist against jaw passed unnoticed. Mike's rough and tumble methods were devoted solely to Carter's man Friday. It might have been two minutes or twenty that they fought; there was no accounting time. A solid smash from Mike sent the other sprawling down the bank. He grasped at a sapling that gave way and plunged into the angry torrent. Mike raced along the bank. He had no intention of killing or drowning the man. Beside, there was a question or two to be asked. He caught the other's outstretched hand and pulled him to the bank. "We'll chat a bit," announced Mike, "before I pull you clear! Who killed Buck Kent?"

"I don't know!"

"You lie, and *that* for a liar!" Mike released his hold. The countless fingers of the flood tugged at Gregg. Too close for comfort the water vanished beneath the ground. Gregg screamed in fright and yelled a single word.

"Carter!"

"A confession or a call for help," muttered Mike. "Carter ain't in sight."

"Help me, Coyle, before it's too late! I'm whipped! I'll talk!"

"Then talk fast while you're in the mood!" ordered Mike.

"Carter started the trouble between Kerrick and Kent. He always works that way; gets the opposition to quarreling. When they nearly got together, he shot at Kerrick from the brush. Later he shot at Kent. He figured each would blame the other, and that's what happened. Buck Kent got on to his game and was coming into Kerrick territory, though Kerrick had sworn to shoot him. Just the same he came to prove Carter was at the bottom of it, and that's when Carter shot. The report coming from behind startled Kerrick and his trigger finger did the rest. Pull me out, Coyle!"

"There was a lot of beatings in the timber of late," observed Mike coolly. "What about them?"

"Carter's way of keeping out timber cruisers from rival companies. He didn't want them to know how much he was getting."

In the midst of a plea for help Carter saw Mike Coyle approaching. One swift glance at the beaten Gregg told him the sit-

uation. His hand dropped to his holster for the pistol he carried, but a swifter hand jerked the pistol clear and hurled it into the brush. "Good work, Miss," applauded Mike. "Catch him, Jackie; the job's yours."

Something in Mike's tone told Jack Kent the truth. His fighting thus far had been mostly mental. He wanted personal contact. Carter plunged through the timber. It seemed incredible the course of events had taken in a few short hours. Instead of dominating the situation he was flying from it! When he heard his pursuer's footsteps he increased his pace in a final burst, then suddenly turned, panting, almost crying. He knew Kent just had recovered from a wound, was weak, but he knew also that Kent was determined. In his life he had cornered many, but this was the first time he had been cornered. He thought of

fight, yet turned and fled. Below him the torrent roared. He hesitated, then slid through the brush. Kent followed. Men on the opposite shore yelled a warning as Kent drove Carter on to the mass of floating timber. Neither man heard. The earth dam was going out, slowly breaking before the pressure.

Then the thing Kent hoped for happened. The mass beneath him moved! Logs boomed and cracked beneath the pressure; water spumed between them—dirty water heavy with muck. The shore line moved backward. Kent's calks bit deep as he leaped from log to log, always working toward shore, always driving the other ahead of him. The shore line moved swifter. They were on the crest of the wall of water, that piled against the sides of a canyon, spread out and spilled onward. Once or twice Carter looked back. His pursuer apparently had forgotten self in a grim determination to reach him.

Carter cleared an open stretch of water and found footing on a great cedar. Shore was closer now. He felt the log tilt suddenly and looked back. Kent was on the same log.

"No you don't, Carter! You're going back for trial!"

A moment ensued during which each struggled to retain his footing; then they roared through another canyon, and the full sweep of the South Fork caught them at the junction. The log rolled violently and Kent leaped. He all but went under, then struggled to the surface a split second before the timbers closed about him. The final effort to gain a footing left him helpless. He looked about, the big cedar was still spinning, the river clear except for the wet, brown backs of his timber. Somewhere below there must be a mangled, crushed thing which had been Carter. Jack Kent struggled to shore and dropped to the ground. The tide of timber rushed on!

Chapter IX

KERRICK TAKES A TRIP

IT HAD been a month since Kerrick had left for a trip to California, thence to eastern points. In his memory he carried a series of pictures. There had been the blowing of a river bank to stop the flow from the dam. Mike Coyle had done this shortly after Jack Kent returned up the river alone, with his old wound bleeding slightly from his struggles. Later, the cottage had been the scene of a wedding and then because the groom could not travel and the now-father-in-law could, Kerrick had traveled. The happiness on Helen's face had thrilled him, but the scar across his land and the muck that had once been a lake, saddened him. Even now after thirty days he hesitated to return. He loved the old order, the peace of the lake—beauty.

He rubbed his eyes as he looked through the trees. *The lake was there!* A landlocked salmon broke water with a loud splash, his silver gleaming momentarily in the soft light of fading day. On the porch a happy pair watched the sunset, dreaming of the morrow and things to be done. Then they saw him and swooped down, laughing, shaking his hand, embracing. He felt almost old. "But the lake, Jack?"

"Stopped up the old outlet below, put a concrete dam across the old creek bed and spilled enough water over the dam to fill the lake. There she is, good as ever, and you're a few landlocked salmon ahead of the game."

"And you?"

"Rolling in wealth. My logs hit a high market; nearly wrecked it in fact! I'm told the power house and dam are for sale. Since I feel like traveling now, Helen and I plan to run up to Seattle and buy it."

ON SANTUCK SHORE

By WARREN ELLIOT CARLETON

Author of "Riders of the Surf," "The Box Trap," etc.

TO THE COAST GUARD THE CALL TO SAVE LIFE RINGS OVER RAGING WINTRY SEAS MORE THUNDEROUSLY THAN ANY TEMPEST'S FURY, MORE COMMANDINGLY THAN ANY PERSONAL DESIRE. WITH THAT DOOMED SCHOONER POUNDING HER LIFE OUT ON OFFAL LEDGE, THAT WILD NIGHT, CHILTON AND CAPTAIN RICH FORGOT EVERYTHING EXCEPT HER CREW'S PERIL

THE cold afternoon gale of early March fusiladed the small windows panes of Santuck coast guard station with a whirlwind of sand, accompanied by the eerie shriek of the wind and the clatter of a few loose shingles on the roof below.

To the south stretched the seven mile desolate waste of Cape Cod sand dunes to wooded Goose Point. To the north the dunes melted into the grassy heights of the steep Sachem Bluffs, beyond which hazily jutted the cone-shaped top of Sandy Hollow Lighthouse. Behind the station the scrub growth rising to the pine woods of the upland shut off the view to the west. And in the east—water; the whole agitated Atlantic; nothing but blue, white-capped breakers, smashing on Offal Ledge, the long stretch of hidden shoals between Santuck and Sandy Hollow coast guard stations.

No. 1 Surfman Hosea Chilton, sitting his lookout in the tower, got up and stretched his long legs. He was a big fellow in the early forties, raw-boned, angular, with wide shoulders suggestive of tremendous strength, and a gaunt, smooth shaven, bronzed face, blue eyes, shaggy brows, and a well shaped forehead—the features of a resolute fellow who thinks for himself, who can be relied on in a crisis such as frequently confronts the men of the coast guard.

Hosea paced across the limited space of the tower, whistling softly to himself. Far on the horizon a white sail twinkled in the glaring sunlight. He looked at it thoughtfully for a moment, then resumed his pacing and scarcely audible whistling. This was the hell of a life! To think he had wasted twenty years in this thankless service! And after all that time only a No. 1 surfman. Four years ago, when Cap Walker died of pneumonia, he thought he would surely be appointed keeper of Santuck station, the succession to which his twenty years of service had seemingly entitled him. And then what had happened? Why, Alf Rich, No. 1 surfman at Quanset, was sent down to fill the vacancy and he was still in command at Santuck.

Twenty years wasted! He would contract eye trouble or rheumatism in a few years, and then it would be too late for him to make a change. There would be a vacancy next month at Sandy Hollow station, for Cap White had completed thirty years of service and would be retired on a pension. But the new keeper there? Oh, one of the district superintendent's favorites would get it, somebody from another station farther away, like Alf Rich.

A step on the stairs, and up came Dave Hart, No. 7 surfman, a young fellow who, after several years of seafaring, part of the time on a hospital ship, had joined the Santuck crew a few months ago. He was a hard looking little cuss. His black eyes

glinted slyly as he greeted Hosea with "Well, Hosy, have you thought over what you'n me was talkin' about yesterday?"

Hosea hesitated.

"You go on midnight patrol tonight, you know," Hart reminded him, leaning against the wall and folding his short, heavy arms.

"Yes—I've thought it over," replied Hosea reflectively. "It sounds good to me." He tried to inject enthusiasm into his voice.

Evidently he succeeded, for Hart exclaimed, "Good! It's realy too good a chance to let slide, even if there would be hell to pay if the truth was known. But there's no reason for it bein' known. All the rest of us will keep it dark, 'cause we've all been in on it with Cap. And it's a cinch Cap won't let it out. So now everybody at Santuck is in on it. Makes me feel easier, somehow."

"Thanks for putting me wise," said Hosea listlessly.

"Don't mention it!" replied Hart. "You'd better speak to Cap about it. And if he acts surprised, just tell him 'twas me that told you about it. If he's sore, he'll have to git over it. Put me wise to how you come out with him," added Hart as he went down the stairs again.

Hosea walked back and forth across the floor. He could not realize that things had come to such a pass at Santuck station. What would Cap Walker say if he could come back and walk the midnight patrol, to behold his successor in command, Cap Rich himself, accepting bribes from smugglers? If he could see the newest member of the crew, going fifty-fifty with Rich on that hush money, as all the men on the midnight patrol the past several weeks had been in the habit of doing with their commander? The morale of the station shattered, the pledges each man took when he joined the coast guard violated! And he, Hosea Chilton, after twenty years in the service, approached by the No. 7 surfman and "put wise" to the "goings on" that Cap Rich, possibly out of fear that Hosea would double-cross him, had hitherto kept hidden from him. And hidden successfully. For Hosea would never have suspected such a thing if Hart hadn't put a flea in his ear.

Hart's revelation was that on the midnight patrol Cap went out on certain nights with the patrolman on pretext that he was obeying orders from headquarters to keep up a special lookout for a gang of smugglers, headed by a notorious outlaw skipper named Kyle, that had been operating the past month or two on the outer Cape Cod coast. But when Cap and the No. 1 surfman, who, the previous week, had happened to be Hart, arrived at a certain spot behind a knoll in the upland between Santuck and Sandy Hollow, they met one of Kyle's men and accepted from him a sum of money never less than one hundred dollars. In consideration of this amount, Cap and the patrolman marched on to the halfway house and absented themselves there until Kyle had entered the Lagoon, a sheltered little harbor inside the beach, approached by a narrow unmarked channel which only a skipper who was thoroughly acquainted with that dangerous coast could safely enter.

That was all there was to it. Then Cap and the patrolman returned to the station. The smugglers usually cached their discharged cargo in the pine woods somewhere at the head of the Lagoon, where it was quite safe, for the nearest village, Howesport, is four miles away, and the pines, on both sides of the path covered by the patrolman at the head of the Lagoon form a thick jungle. Automobile trucks usually came the next day and removed the cached goods.

Hosea was grateful to Hart for his generosity in giving him a chance to share this hush money with Cap. No doubt Cap would speak to him about it, too, for Hart had declared that Kyle was going to land a cargo that night, and Cap could not very well accept the bribe unless Hosea went in on it, too.

But it was not his share of the hush money that Hosea wanted. To him Cap Rich represented all that was rotten—everything which should be weeded out of the coast guard. Not that Hosea held anything personal against Cap for his appointment as keeper over him. But he welcomed this as a chance to expose a traitor to the coast guard, a cur who had violated the trust the government had placed in him. Honor—that was the only reward Hosea had reaped from his twenty years on Santuck beach. Nobody would take that from him. He would fight the whole crew if necessary to reveal their perfidy.

He had worked himself up into quite a fury when he heard another step on the stairs. Up came Cap Rich himself. The chunky, red-faced keeper of the station had just eaten an early supper, and was voicing his pleasant memories of the meal with loud smacks on the shreds of a gnawed toothpick. His bushy black mustache was moist with coffee. His brown eyes twink-

led pleasantly, and he asked in a smooth bass voice that revealed none of the doubts concerning the midnight patrol that might be in his heart, "Anythin' stirrin', Hosy?"

"S c h o o n e r—wide—that's all. Any news?"

"Got a hurricane warnin'. No'theaster. Tonight."

"I looked for it. Goin' to be thick, too, I cal'late. Just my luck, too, me bein' on midnight patrol."

Cap sucked tenderly on the toothpick. "Any news about Kyle?" asked Hosea. Hosea spoke the name of the smuggler chief much as a Western sheriff of a half-century ago would have mentioned Jesse James. For Kyle was defying the entire coast guard, cutters and all, and getting away with it.

"Well, only the usual line." Hosea noted that Cap did not speak enthusiastically of the man whom the coast guard officers had been ordered to make a special effort to catch. " 'Twasn't like this in the old days," growled Cap, "when you'n me was in the old life-savin' service. This

smugglin' business came in with that Eighteenth Amendment. I don't know as I blame smugglers for——"

He stopped abruptly, as if realizing that it would be unbecoming for an employee of the government to commit himself on so delicate a question. Hosea, to lead the keeper on, voiced his opinion hotly without a second's hesitation, as he had done several times in the presence of Cap when some of the government's methods were discussed.

"Blame 'em?" Hosea exploded. "I don't blame anybody for squeezin' all he can git out o' the government, after the way it used me."

His effort to get Cap started on the subject Hart had suggested fell flat, for Cap, instead of rising to the bait, lapsed into a sort of reverie, gazing fixedly out over the water. So Hosea came directly to the point.

"Looka here, Cap," he said, "are you goin' fifty-fifty with me tonight?"

Cap looked at him, frowning perplexedly. "What are you drivin' at?" he asked.

"The money you're gittin' from Kyle to keep his landin's on this coast dark, I mean. The money you've been splittin' fifty-fifty with the midnight patrolman to Sandy Hollow halfway house every night Kyle makes a landin' in the Lagoon."

Cap looked down, toeing an imaginary mark on the floor. "Hart tell you about it?" he asked.

"Yeah. And my pocketbook's rather lean, Cap."

Cap chuckled a little, making an awkward attempt to conceal his embarrassment. "That damned Hart is too apt to let his guts out," he commented. "Well, Hosy, I was intendin' to speak about that very thing to you when I came up here. But I didn't know just how you'd feel about it. Kinder delicate subject to broach to an old man in the service, like you'n me." He asked rather pleadingly, "Then I can depend on you, Hosy? It's Kyle himself we're dealin' with tonight."

"Why—yes," hesitated Hosea, startled by the announcement that if he went with Cap he would meet the notorious Kyle face to face, and realizing that an opportunity for something more than the exposure of Cap had unexpectedly come to him. "It's no more than right for me to be in on the rake-off."

Cap grasped Hosea's hand warmly. Hosea could not look the gullible keeper in the eye. Cap noticed it, and remarked, "You needn't be ashamed of it, Hosea. All the other boys here have been in on it right along." Cap started down the stairs. "We'll go together on the patrol," he said, hesitating on the second step down. "And you'll find Kyle is quite generous with his money, quite generous."

II

HOSEA had thought of telephoning the district superintendent, revealing to him Cap's plans and asking for assistance in capturing Kyle. But he could not do it without attracting the attention of the crew, and, besides, it was too late. The whole crew would be against him. There was nobody at Santuck he could depend on to assist him in performing his duty by capturing Kyle and exposing Cap.

So he decided to attempt the capture of Kyle single-handed. If Cap interfered, he would have to put a bullet in him in order to bag the bigger game. The bribe itself had passed out of his mind. That and the

exposure of Cap would have to be settled later. The one big problem he considered as he lay in his cot in the sleeping room, and the other surfmen not on patrol snored and the gale increased outside, was the capture of the smuggler chief himself and getting him into the hands of the police of Howesport village, four miles away.

He had talked more with Hart and asked him more explicitly about Cap's methods of dealing with Kyle. Hart had repeated his previous narrative with few elaborations, commenting, "Wish I was on patrol tonight. That slice o' cash I got from Cap sure did splice the ends of a lean year."

Hosea's nerves were on edge when he jumped out of his cot and joined Cap and Green, the midnight patrolman to Goose Point, in the mess room, and they silently ate their warmed-over beans and drank their coffee. Davis and Higgins came in from the eight-o'clock patrol, and removed their oil-skins.

"Blowin' like hell out," commented Davis. "Thick! Rain and fog both. Queer night, and damned uncomfortable."

"Anythin' doin'?" asked Cap, buttoning on his sou'wester.

"Not a thing," replied Higgins, and Davis substantiated him.

Cap and Hosea started out in the storm. The fog blew in the shifting wind of the generally northeasterly gale, mixed with rain squalls, which shut off the world from the two coast guards outside the little ovals of dancing light given out from the lanterns swinging at their sides. In the holster on his belt Hosea carried the automatic pistol. In his trousers pocket under the oilskins he had a pair of handcuffs and the key.

He and Cap did not talk, for their voices would be lost in the howl of the gale. They trudged along, winding their way around and over the sand dunes, into the upland, and through the path zigzagging among the wet bayberry bushes, around the empty Lagoon, and through the upland on the other side of it.

From Hart's revelations Hosea had developed his plan for capturing Kyle. For Kyle was wanted for almost every crime that can be charged against an outlaw skipper. His arrest would be the main event; the exposure of Cap would be only the sideshow.

Occasionally they stopped and attempted to look offshore. But the sea was a void of dancing fog and black, thundering water, on which white flashes of phosphorus gave the only light beside the shrouded rays of the lanterns. Spray blew in saucy showers, and with it was mixed wet sand from the shifting dunes; that terrible sand of Cape Cod which, on a night like this, sticks to the flesh like glue, gouges into the pores, eyes and ears of the coast guard, against which oilskins are inadequate protection.

"God! Kyle can't land tonight!" shouted Cap against the onshore gale. "No ship could find the Lagoon channel in this weather."

"I'm not so sure about that," replied Hosea. "Smugglin' has evidently been done on nights like this, accordin' to headquarters."

Cap did not answer, but set the pace along the beach, or into the upland. The roar of the breakers on the terrible shoals of Offal Ledge, the outer bar of which extended a mile out into the ocean, attested the violence of the gale. If they walked on the beach they were drenched with cold spray; if they followed the path into the upland, the stinging sand of the dunes, blowing in young tornadoes, tortured them. It is just such a storm as this that the coast guard of the Cape dread, especially on the midnight patrol.

A faint light showed in the upland. Cap grasped Hosea's arm.

"That's him," Cap declared. "Up in the lee of that little knoll where we worked over the men from the wreck of the *Nokomis.*"

Hosea's nerves tensed. His hand felt of the automatic under his oilskins. The touch of it reassured him, gave him fresh confidence for the events which lay before him.

And Cap plodded eagerly ahead toward the gradually brightening light, Hosea following. Then the light resolved itself into a lantern, and beside it stood a figure a little shorter than Hosea—a face fringed with a short beard. A man who stood with arms folded, the lantern resting on the sand, calmly, silently awaiting them.

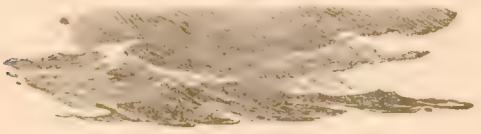
Hosea's eyes took in the surroundings, and he lagged a little behind Cap, so that when he leaped into action he could keep his two prisoners together, and not be caught between them. He would have to work fast in drawing the pistol. Kyle had been in scrapes worse than this, and got out of them without a scratch. He was noted for his dexterity with firearms.

"Bad storm!" Kyle casually greeted them in a gruff voice. "Came up rather sudden, didn't it?"

"We got warnin's this afternoon," re-

plied Cap, "but it's been workin' round for a blow like this for the last week. Bad night for a landin', ain't it?"

"Oh, bad enough," Kyle remarked, as if he were not in the least worried over the fury of the Atlantic. Hosea wondered how this daredevil skipper ever got ashore



to negotiate with Cap. A small boat surely could not live in that sea. But Kyle answered his doubts by commenting, "The boys I came ashore with are scoutin' round in the upland somewhere. They're some boys handlin' a cutter in rough weather."

"They must be! A damned sight better'n my crew," said Cap. "Your vessel offshore, Kyle, in this blow?"

"Don't worry about that," smiled Kyle enigmatically. "Here 'tis." He passed Cap a roll of bills. "One hundred dollars," said Kyle. "That suit you?"

"Perfectly," agreed Cap, counting the greenbacks.

"Then make yourselves scarce for a couple o' hours," Kyle ordered. Cap started along the path. He turned to motion Hosea to follow him—and looked into the muzzle of the No. 1 surfman's automatic.

"Put up your hands—both o' you!" shouted Hosea. "Perhaps you think, Cap, that I'm double-crossin' you for my own good. Well, I ain't." He prodded his pistol toward Kyle when the latter's upraised arms suddenly dived toward his belt, and at his motion the arms went up again. "Keep 'em up, now, both o' you! You know me, Cap. You know I ain't the jokin' kind. I just as soon kill both of you here as not, if you give me trouble. You're both under arrest!"

"Hosy, don't be a damned fool!" huskily bawled Cap. "You can't arrest Kyle. His men are in the upland——"

"To hell with 'em!" screamed Hosea, now resolved to see the thing through regardless of consequences. "I'll fight 'em all! Let 'em come on! The coast guard has too many traitors in it at Santuck. But it won't have a coward—in me!" He set down his lantern and pulled out the handcuffs. "Step this way, Kyle," he ordered. The smuggler chief hesitated, then thought better of it, and advanced gingerly, staring defiantly at Hosea. "Hold out one hand," Hosea commanded. Down came Kyle's right hand. Cap made a quick move. Hosea jumped back, firing at Cap's leg as he did so. Cap doubled up, letting out a howl, and felt of his rubber boot. Kyle, awed by the determination of their captor, stood meekly with both hands outstretched.

"Get up!" Hosea yelled at Cap, who was nursing his leg. "Get up and put these bracelets on Kyle, there. Quick!"

"My leg!" protested Cap.

"To hell with it!" roared Hosea. "Move fast, or——"

A look of terror suddenly crept into Cap's face. No more did he caress his injured leg, but stared wide-eyed out toward the void of the open Atlantic. "Get a move on!" repeated Hosea, keeping both Cap and the smuggler chief under surveillance, fearful lest the shot which had crippled Cap would attract Kyle's shipmates from the upland.

"God!" shouted Cap, jumping up, unmindful of his gun wound, and pointing excitedly offshore. "Rockets—rockets—out wide!"

Hosea moved slightly around so that he could get a view of the hidden ocean and keep his prisoners under guard at the same time. And as he did so, out of the corner of his eye he caught the glare of the thin line of fire that shot, a burning arc through the thickness of fog and rain, from the outer bar of Offal Ledge.

For a moment he stood transfixed, while rocket after rocket shot up through the wind blown fog. And the eyes of his two prisoners were evidently on those trains of fire announcing the grounding of some vessel on the dreaded outer bar of Offal Ledge. For Offal Ledge is one of the worst stretches of shoal water on the whole Atlantic seaboard. The inner bar is bad enough, and in the several shipwrecks that have occurred there some two hundred lives have been lost. But the outer bar, with its seaward-piercing tongue of hidden sand, has an even more sinister record.

Five vessels are known to have grounded there within the past fifty years. At each of these wrecks it was impossible to launch the surf boat, too far to shoot the shot line of the breeches buoy. Not a soul was saved from those five wrecks on the outer bar; the only hope for a vessel that strikes on it is that she will wash off and be driven on to the inner bar, which nearly always can be reached by the life-saving apparatus.

Hosea grasped the whole situation at a glance. He saw his plans to bring in Kyle going to smash, his case against Cap Rich thwarted by the exigency of rescue,

or of attempting rescue. For above catching smugglers or revealing treachery in the ranks of the service comes the first duty of the coast guard which was handed down to it from the old life-saving service —to save human lives and, if possible, the cargoes of vessels.

Hosea holstered the pistol, replaced the handcuffs in his trousers pocket under the oilskins.

"It's no time for monkey business," he shouted excitedly at Cap. "Go on, Cap—you and Kyle—you're free to do as you damned please. I'm goin' to the halfway house to telephone and call out the crew.

Cap had a Coston signal in his hand and set it off, paying no attention to Hosea's words. It lighted the fog blood red, surrounding the captain with a ruby glow and showering red sparks around his shoulders while he held the Coston signal high above his head as he managed to keep a footing at the edge of the upland. What Kyle was doing Hosea didn't know and didn't care, for Hosea struck out on a dog trot along the path toward the halfway house between Santuck and Sandy Hollow.

The path was hard to follow, and several times Hosea was lost in its mazes. But each time he searched until he found some bits of wreckage that would serve him as familiar landmarks over areas where the path itself over the sand dunes had been obliterated by the gale. He would run a little way, then slacken his pace to get his bearings—into the upland, down on the beach, sometimes into the undertow from the waves themselves, where the high-course tide was washing it over the high-water mark.

And so, the lantern swinging at his side, not stopping to look behind, he kept on to the halfway house, and tumbled, almost breathless, inside the rough-boarded shack.

He grabbed the telephone, and rang the station, two short rings and a long. A brief delay, and somebody answered. It sounded like Davis.

"Wreck—on the outer bar—Offal Ledge —Chilton calling!" panted Hosea. "Out wide! Bring surf boat—bad job!"

"All right, we'll be right there!" shouted Davis, and hung up.

Hosea didn't wait for Hines, the patrolman from Sandy Hollow who was to meet him at the halfway house, but deposited his check in the little iron safe to show Hines that he had been there, and started back to the scene of the wreck. Hines would see the light of the torches at the wreck, and would know that there was trouble on the Santuck shore, when he reached the halfway house, and it was not time for him to do so yet. But the rivalry between the Sandy Hollow and Santuck crews was so keen that the crew of one station would not relish the presence of the crew of the other at a rescue. Santuck would handle the situation without the help of Sandy Hollow, and Santuck could handle it adequately. If they couldn't reach the wreck, no crew of the coast guard could. Hosea would command them if Cap were incapacitated.

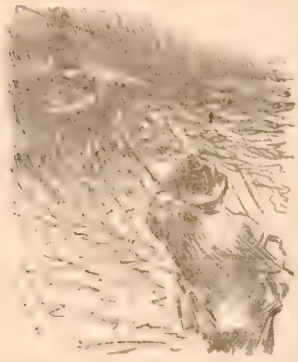
Hosea ran down the hill upon which the halfway house was perched in a cluster of scrub pines, and traced the path by the light of his lantern down among the sand dunes of the beach. But there he encountered greater obstacles. The wind had altered the position of the sand dunes, forming new ones where before the gale there had been none, tearing down old sand dunes that ordinarily served the patrolmen as landmarks. Among them Hosea wandered, lost for the time being, with nothing to aid him in getting his bearings. He could faintly make out the red glow of a Coston signal still burning where he had left Cap and Kyle, but when he tried to direct his course by its beacon, he wallowed into the undertow, and a roller smashed around his feet. Between the roar of the surf and the howl of the gale, his hearing was of no assistance.

He was in a bad fix—lost among the sand dunes. Cautiously he retraced his way back toward what must be the upland, and a sand dune crumbled under him, dropping him toward a wall of water thundering in from another angle. He dropped his lantern, and it went out with an audible hiss in the churning water. With both hands and feet he dug into the loose sand, and finally succeeded in fighting his way back to its top. There he paused for a moment to get his breath, while the sand whirled and he breathed it, ate it, felt it gouge into his eyes, the pores of his body.

Like a blind man he groped, wandered back and forth, he knew not where. Always that red glow of the Coston signal guided him, yet always led him into danger of a different kind. And then he stumbled over a bit of wood from an old wreck that had been cast up on the beach years ago. He recognized it, bore to the right, and hit the path.

Now it was easier going, even in the dark without his lantern. He struggled

along through the dunes, into the upland. Now the fresh Coston signal was casting out a brighter light. Even the fog did not lessen its brilliance. Then Hosea sighted people moving about on the beach, and a bright white light burst forth, the torches of the coast guard. By their penetrating, almost dazzling illumination the rescue by breeches buoy or surf boat is effected.



Hosea joined the Santuck crew who had reached the scene of the wreck before him because of his aimless wandering, lost in the sand dunes. Cap Rich, his leg wreathed with weird bandages, was in command, and he had abandoned the beach cart with the breeches-buoy outfit in favor of the surf boat, upon gauging the distance of the wreck, the position of which, far out on the outer bar, was visible on the rise and fall of the seas by the far reaching flare of the torches.

Cap was bawling orders with his usual thoroughness, for he was an efficient leader in the use of the surf boat and breeches buoy, preparing his men for rescue work with each by weekly drills. The men had on their cork jackets, and by the way Gray was backing Polly, the station horse, toward the water with the surf-boat wagon, it was evident that Cap intended at least to attempt the precarious launching of the surf boat.

Hosea, panting and weary from his exertions, got a cork jacket from the beach cart and donned it hastily over his oilskins. He took his place at the side of the surf boat with his crew mates, as he had been taught to do in their weekly drill. Then Gray stopped old Polly in the undertow, and they moved the surf boat out on its roller, setting it down with the back wash rolling in froth and foam around its pointed bow.

Cap stood at the pointed stern, singing out orders. Hart was to be left ashore to assist the surf boat in landing when it returned from the wreck. Kyle, who had busied himself with the lighting of the torches and minor details earlier, stood near Hart and watched the grouping of the Santuck men at the sides of the surf boat, waiting for Cap's command to launch the double-pointed little craft. In spite of the bullet lodged in his leg, Cap was moving about with a fair amount of agility.

The first launching was a failure. They waited for the third roller, which usually is smaller than the receding two, and tried it again. But that roller, too, proved to be too much for the small boat, and it was shot as if from a catapult high and dry. The waves that crashed in just beyond the seething battle line of the undertow were veritable mountains of water, curling in unbroken from the open Atlantic, waves upon which the launching of the surf boat would be almost suicide, waves that would break up the grounded vessel in a surprisingly short while.

"Try her again, boys!" shouted Cap, undaunted by the first two failures. Again the crew took their places at the sides of the surf boat, and again they waited for Cap's order, which would come with the third roller. Two big seas thundered in, and the roller that followed looked much smaller. "Git off!" yelled Cap, and again they launched the surf boat, shoving its nose into the onrushing lighter sea.

But without warning, that roller rose to unexpected heights, and again the surf boat was wrenched out of their hands and shot past them. The crew jumped in all directions to avoid being hit by the unmanageable boat, which darted past them with the speed of a projectile. But Cap, handicapped by his injured leg, did not dodge quickly enough. The side of the surf boat struck him in the back, and knocked him flat in the back wash, crushing him under it as it was cast up on the shore.

Hosea knew what had happened. With the others he rushed to Cap and lifted him ashore. There, out of the undertow, they carried him to the lee of the beach cart. He appeared to be badly hurt. Hart, who had acquired a slight knowledge of medicine in the hospital ship during his seafaring days, worked over him, and the crew, led by Hosea, who now acted as captain, returned to attempt again the launching of the surf boat.

Kyle rushed up to Hosea. "Let me take an oar," he begged. "I'm a good hand with an oar. Let me go. For God's sakes, let me——"

"All right. You're No. 3," consented Hosea, knowing that without a full bank of oars on each side it would be impossible for them to reach the wreck. It would be difficult enough even with a full complement. And it was better to take a chance on Kyle's ability than to give up the at-

tempt, for there were lives out there in the dark that might be saved.

Hosea waited for the third roller, the men eager, undaunted by the previous failures, standing alert in their places at the sides. Two heavy seas, then the third roller, one indubitably lighter than the others.

"Git off!" yelled Hosea, shoving the stern as the crew shot the boat forward.

Across the thwarts lay the long steering oar with which he was to guide the surf boat in its fight to reach the wreck. Into the small roller the boat was plunged. It hovered for a second, and they nosed it out farther.

"In bow!" shouted Hosea, and Gray vaulted into his position as bow oarsman.

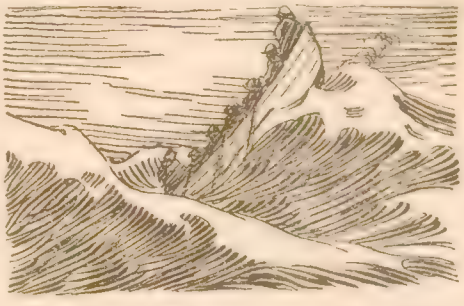
Rapidly he worked his oar into place, and one after the other his mates jumped into their places after him. Oars shot into the water and were pulled rapidly, wildly, in the effort of the crew to hold the craft against the huge roller already towering ahead of the bow. Into his position as steersman Hosea leaped, shipping his long oar the instant his feet were in the boat, and steering to meet the vast wall of water hurtling down on them.

"Give way together!" he thundered. "Give it to her together—give her hell, Davis"—the stroke oar—"give her——"

The boat rose, fell, shipping a few gallons of the curling wave. It shot ahead like a porpoise, all hands rowing like madmen, Davis setting a sturdy stroke, Hosea bending his whole weight on the steering oar. Under them what was left of the roller broke, and they were clear to fight their way to the next.

And fight they did, those resolute men of Santuck. Through the curling breakers of the inner bar they toiled gamely at the oars, Davis setting a tireless stroke, Hosea steering like his whalemen ancestors, holding her steady, now plunging his oar deep, now lifting it, sheering to prevent being caught in the trough or being swamped by a curling comber, both of which continually menaced them until they had cleared the inner bar.

The light of the torches dimmed. The blowing fog seemed to be thinner, for now Hosea could get an occasional view of the two masts of the wreck when the surf boat rose to the crest of a wave. Behind them the greenish water of the inner bar deepened into the black turmoil of rollers extending over three-quarters of a mile to the wreck itself. Surveying that chaos, Hosea quivered slightly at the thought of what lay before him. His men were rowing like demons, rowing with their backs and arms, their teeth clenched. He felt ashamed of his doubts about them—steeled himself to fight it through with them.



"Give it to her! Now easy! There—bust your backs!" he ordered as they bucked the rollers, easing up, then pulling like fiends. Disloyal or not, those men were heroes, not thinking of themselves, as he had been. If they had been in accord with Cap Rich in his acceptance of bribes from the smugglers, they were making up for it now in doing their duty, showing heroism even greater than that which they had pledged themselves to perform when they joined the service.

Closer and closer loomed the shadowy masts of the wreck. The fog was thinner offshore there; the rain squalls had ceased. Hosea, swinging the steering oar back and forth, holding the surf boat out of the trough of the waves, could indistinctly make out the forms of men huddled in the rigging of the mainmast. The two-masted schooner, for such she appeared to be, had struck in the very worst spot possible on the outer bar. It was a little stretch of rocks called "the Quarry," rising almost above the encompassing green water of the bar itself at low tide.

No vessel that ever struck on the Quarry had been washed off the outer bar; in fact, it was the Quarry which had claimed all five of the wrecks which had broken up on the outer bar. And tradition has it that it was the Quarry where the *Somerset*, British man-of-war, the "phantom ship with each mast and spar across the moon like a prison bar" of Longfellow's poem, "The Midnight Ride of Paul Revere," ultimately came to grief in Revolutionary days.

As the men at the oars in the surf boat brought the craft closer and closer to the wreck, Hosea could make out the mad play of the breakers over the rocks of the Quarry and about the sides of the more distinguishable wreck itself. The wreck was caught squarely on the rocks, and her hull

had evidently been opened by the impact. Now, smashed on the Quarry with the pounding of each oncoming giant roller, she had sunk, and it was only on the fall of each sea that her gored side showed at all. The masts swayed, almost dipping the men in the rigging underwater with each lurch of the breaking-up hull.

"Give it to her, men!" exhorted Hosea, and they groaned with their concerted exertions, doggedly, skilfully bending their backs to the stroke set by Davis, who occupied the stroke oarsman's seat directly in front of Hosea and facing him.

Now the battle had become a steady pull against the great masses of water rolling shoreward from where they were broken on the outer bar. If the muscles of those panting, laboring men ahead of him in the surf boat only held out until they reached the Quarry, they would establish a precedent at Santuck. Their surf boat would be the first that had reached the outer bar in such a sea as this. The thought inspired Hosea to encourage his men continually.

"Give it to her! Put your life into it! We're gainin'! Only a little ways farther! Hold water, port—give way, there, starb'ard!"

The masts were drawing closer, as was the turmoil of smashing breakers leaping on the sides of the wreck and swirling over the rocks of the Quarry. The men did not slacken their efforts. Davis set a stalwart stroke, putting the best that was in his powerful, thickset body into the steady sweep of his blade. From Davis to Gray they comprised a rhythmic human machine, coordinating like one man, six rugged warriors of the surf whose lives depended on their own ability to keep up their strokes and on the keen judgment and quick action of their steersman.

The boiling water of the Quarry dashed around them, drenching them, while they let loose all their reserve force like sprinters at the finish of a fiercely contested race.

"Keep it up!" bawled Hosea, throwing his weight on the steering oar, leaning far back again and twisting it as far as it would go in the opposite direction, now thrusting the oar deep, now feathering it just below the surface.

And there the hardest battle of all was fought. Not a foot did the surf boat seem to gain. It teetered on the crests of shattered combers that toyed with it, twirling it around until Hosea thrust it out of the trough with a deft sweep of his steering oar. A falling sea lowered them abruptly, and under their feet the bottom of the surf boat vibrated against an out-jutting rock. It upset the men, but one by one they struggled to regain their balance, each clinging to his oar as he did so and holding its handle low to lift the blade above the surface.

The next comber lifted them off the rock and dashed the surf boat back, while the men quickly got their oars into the water and resumed their concerted bending of backs, imitating perfectly every motion of the tireless Davis. Hosea, knowing that the Quarry could never be negotiated by pulling the surf boat over those rocks, steered abruptly to starboard, risking the trough of the waves and the cross currents running perilously in all directions to bring the surf boat out of the white water of the danger zone, preferring to work the craft round to windward of the wreck rather than chance another crash on a hidden boulder.

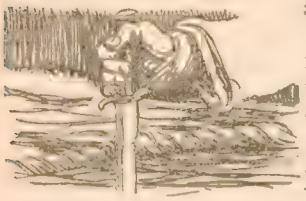
The surf boat appeared to be undamaged by the impact, and Hosea's worries were considerably lessened when he noted that the water in the boat was not boiling in through the bottom, but was evidently from the wild seas that dashed over the gunwales while the double-pointed craft was fighting through them. Now more wave crests lapped over the gunwales, for the position of the surf boat, edging sidewise against the wind and current, menaced the little craft constantly with capsizing. In those waves the surf boat with its seven passengers was a mere cockleshell. Only its staunch construction and the seamanship of the Santuck crew had saved it from seemingly inevitable disaster when it struck on the rock.

The fight with the surf at the Quarry has now become history in the coast guard. All along the Cape they will tell you how Hosea Chilton performed a maritime miracle out there on the frightful sea of the outer bar, steering the surf boat successfully through the trough of the waves, bringing it to windward of the wreck, working it before the wind down around the pitching bow of the grounded two-masted schooner, and then holding it in the lee of the wreck. Castaways, gladdened by the arrival of their rescuers, came down the ratlines from the crosstree of the mainmast while the surf boat moved gingerly up to the heaving port rail.

In the bow stood Gray, holding the painter. He cast it to the ratlines, and one of the shipwrecked men caught it. Quickly they pulled the surf boat up to the rail,

too quickly, Hosea thought, for an orderly rescue. And shielding his mouth with one hand, the other resting on the steering oar, he bawled: "One at a time now! No crowdin'! Gray, stand by to cut the painter at the first show of crowdin'!"

A knife already gleamed in Gray's hand,



and he repeated Hosea's commands to the men who, in orderly procession, one by one, scrambled into the surf boat, which Hosea now held up as close to the wreck as the rolling of that partly submerged hull would permit. And as the rescued men came aboard, Hosea and the crew sang out at them, giving them instructions on how to behave on the even more perilous journey ashore. The coast guard men saw to it that each of the nine men taken off was planted solidly on the bottom of the boat.

"Don't even move!" commanded Hosea as a last measure of precaution. "You're safe in our hands, and it's your only chance for gettin' ashore."

All the rescued men wore life belts, which they had donned on the schooner before taking to the rigging. They were orderly, showing no signs of panic as yet, although Hosea was nervous and doubtful of how they would behave if the surf boat had as close a call getting ashore as it did on its way to the wreck.

"All right—oars! Cast the painter!" Hosea shouted. "Give way together!"

Gray cut loose the painter, and Davis set the stroke. With a wide sweep of his long steering oar Hosea brought the surf boat with its full load of passengers before the wind, and regardless of the menace of the rocks, let the tossing craft go in a bee line for shore.

A great roller lifted them up and dashed them down in an avalanche of water upon which the surf boat rode like a cork. When it settled and lifted them again on another breaking comber, the rocks of the Quarry and the abandoned wreck were far astern.

The passengers, sailors though they were, showed unmistakable signs of panic after the second catapulting of the surf boat that separated them by several hundred feet from the Quarry itself. All nine of them started to get up, and since some of them were seated side by side on the bottom, the ballast of the boat was menaced.

"Sit down, you damned fools!" yelled Hosea, pressing the man between him and Davis back on the bottom, while he held the steering oar with one hand. This quieted the others a little, for most of them saw Hosea's attempt to calm the scared passenger. Then another roller lifted the surf boat, a savage one that poured a fare-ye-well of flying water upon the rescued folk and life-savers alike.

By the scrambling that started the passengers evidently thought they were cast out into the sea itself. The surf boat rocked as they fidgeted about, shouting in a panic and seizing the gunwales.

Hosea saw that it was a crucial moment. Holding the steering oar again with one hand, trusting to luck and the fact that they were riding now with the breakers, he whipped out his revolver and fired a shot into the air.

The panicky crew of the wreck stared, and hesitated as abruptly as they had started to violate the commander's orders.

"Down on the bottom, every man of you!" Hosea screamed, menacing them all with the automatic. "The first man who disobeys gits shot. Don't you see we're tryin' to save your lives—and our own, too?"

Order was restored with the slumping of the passengers back on the bottom. With a powerful sweep of his oar, Hosea snatched the surf boat from the hollow between two rollers, barely avoiding the wall of water, only a small part of which crashed aboard. Had he moved less quickly, that avalanche would have foundered the surf boat, buried them all under its curling white crest.

From then on, the rescued crew gave no trouble. Few are the persons taken off a wreck that do not hinder the life-savers in some manner in the surf boat. The history of the life-savers of Cape Cod is full of such instances, the most appalling of which occurred at Monomoy in 1902 when the surf boat, taking the crew of the barge *Wadena* ashore, was upset by the panic-stricken members of that crew, causing their own drowning and that of seven life-savers when the surf boat capsized.

It was lucky for Hosea and the Santuck men, on the point of exhaustion from their exertions, that the passengers gave no more trouble. For now, although it was less effort for the life-savers to handle their oars, the whole burden of holding the surf boat out of dangerous positions in the waves fell upon Hosea himself. Through the fog he could make out the flare of

torches on shore—it seemed miles and miles away. Time and again his quick work with the steering oar saved the staunch little craft from being engulfed in a great sea racing down on its stern.

Then there was the inner bar to cross, with its cross currents and wild breakers. It seemed to Hosea that his tired muscles, his aching back, would never be equal to the strain of holding the surf boat through that maelstrom.

But he bent to his task, and, with his men rowing raggedly, Davis, drooping over his oar, setting a feeble stroke, Hosea steered straight through the racing white breakers. But the inner bar held no terror for him in the shape of hidden rocks. There were only a few boulders there, and he knew their positions quite well. Besides, the torches were much brighter, and although the fog was denser the closer they came to shore, their light gave him fresh confidence and a determination to fight to a successful finish the all-but-won duel with angry Neptune.

Then, astern, the breakers of the inner bar gnashed, robbed of their last chance to seize their prey, and ahead the last wall of the shore surf formed the final barrier to be overcome.

But even the rocks of the Quarry are not more dangerous to the returning surf boat than that last thundering line of shore surf, which represents the full and final fury of those offshore breakers before they are shattered and swept back, broken, decimated to tiny cascades of froth, retreating from the tide line in the undertow.

By the torch light Hosea could make out figures moving about in the undertow, prepared to assist the surf boat in landing. Then under the surf boat the great comber lifted. Hosea looked down on lights, on people and with thunder rolling in his ears, he dropped dizzily, still hanging to the ineffective steering oar and holding the surf boat head on.

Hosea stuck to his post even after hands on the beach seized the gunwales and the men in the surf boat scrambled out. They dragged the life-saving craft up in the undertow, and then began assisting its nine passengers to the beach. The faces of these men were white; they accepted the assistance of the life-savers without protest; most of them were a little shaky and unsteady on their feet, which was not strange, considering that they had spent some time before the rescue in the rigging of the wreck, and were half frozen when the coast guard reached them.

Hosea recognized Cap White of Sandy Hollow station and some of his crew among the men who had come up with Hart to assist in the landing of the surf boat. And he noticed that they did not leave the men from the wreck after they were helped ashore. In fact, Hosea, staggering on to the sand of the beach, still holding the steering oar, saw dazedly that Cap White and his crew had bunched the rescued men together and were guarding them with drawn automatics.

Hosea stumbled up to Cap White, and asked excitedly, "What's the idea, Cap? Ain't they had enough?"

"Hell, no!" roared Cap. "These men you've fetched ashore are Kyle's smugglers."

And then Hosea remembered what had happened before the wreck. He had forgotten that affair during the rescue. It had never occurred to him from the time the surf boat was launched. He looked around searchingly in the torch light, saw Kyle himself leaning, half exhausted from his ordeal in the surf boat, on the oar he had so skilfully managed at the rescue of his shipmates—the shipmatets whose danger had inspired their chief, rascal though he was, to risk his own life to save them.

Hosea grabbed Cap White's arm.

"Of course—it's Kyle and his crew. And that feller there, that went to the rescue with us, that's Kyle himself!"

Cap White looked at Hosea in amazement.

"That Kyle? How do you know?"

"Cap Rich met him—took a bribe from him. I arrested them both. Then his schooner ran aground," explained Hosea, But he wondered if it was all a dream, for nothing seemed real. The rescue, his exposure of Cap, it was like a nightmare!

But the nimbleness with which Cap White, despite his short, chunky build, dashed over to the fatigued Kyle and grabbed him convinced Hosea that he wasn't dreaming, that what he witnessed there on the beach was a reality like his own aching back and spent energy. For Cap White pounced on the hapless smuggler chief and bore him down to the sand under him.

Hosea got the handcuffs out from under

his oilskins and, getting hold of Kyle's unresisting hands, which Cap had pinned behind the smuggler chief's back, the No. 1 surfman clapped the iron bracelets on his wrists.

"I've got you now, Kyle!" jubilantly exclaimed Hosea. But his joy vanished when he looked into the outlaw's listless eyes. And a feeling of pity for Kyle came over him. Whatever Kyle's past had been, he had atoned for much of it offshore with Hosea in the surf boat. He had gone to the rescue of his shipmates. Foolhardy as the attempt to land a cargo in that storm had been, Kyle had not abandoned his men even when he felt certain that nothing but utter ruin faced him if he went to their rescue.

"Where's Cap Rich?" feebly asked Kyle, showing a little worry as to the fate of his accomplice in violating the revenue laws.

"Gone to the station, two ribs busted, besides his leg," exclaimed Cap White. "Two of my men helped him there. He ain't hurt so very serious. Doc Weston o' Howesport lookin' after him. Seemed to be kinder stunned." He yanked Kyle abruptly to his feet. "I got a 'phone call from the district superintendent about two hours ago," he went on, "tellin' me a radio had been received from the revenue cutters that Kyle had slipped by them and would likely make a bold attempt to land on this coast. Then Hines telephoned from the halfway house that there was a wreck, and I come up with my crew." He glanced at the coast guard men standing watchfully around the chilled, enervated smugglers.

He tilted back the sou'wester that had been pulled down over Kyle's brow and looked into the smuggler chief's face. He gave a little start, and exclaimed, "You Kyle? Where—where have I seen you before? You look familiar, like some one I've ——"

"I guess you have seen me, White," replied Kyle smilingly. "But before we exchange greetings, it might be well for you to take the handcuffs off me and put them on that fellow there—the third one in." He indicated the grouped smugglers with a nod of his head. "You might——"

But the man designated suddenly came to life, and was on his feet with a pistol in his hand. His face in the torch light was that of a fiend. What few teeth he had showed with wide gaps between them in the rigid grin of his scrawny bearded lips. His firearm hovered over all the men in front of him, and he backed stiffly toward the upland. Two of his mates staggered after him, but one fell flat over a piece of wreckage.

The confused mind of Hosea suddenly awoke from its lethargy following the wreck. There was some mistake. That man backing away was more important than the others. The men of Sandy Hollow, taken by surprise and standing like dummies at the sight of the gun in the fugitive's hand, were permitting him to escape without a struggle! He glimpsed Kyle struggling to free himself from the handcuffs, heard him curse.

"Don't let that devil go!" bawled the handcuffed man. "For God's sakes, stop him! *He's* Kyle!"

Hosea suddenly lost all control of himself, all sense of caution. Straight at the man backing toward the upland he jumped. But the weight of his rubber boots dragged him down, and he fell on his knees. He thought he might have been wounded by a pistol bullet, so heavy were his legs. But as he staggered to his feet, he felt no pain, only numbness, and he knew he was unhurt.

But the charge of the coast guard men, both those of Sandy Hollow and Santuck, convinced him that he need not worry about Kyle. For in another moment they were dragging him down from the upland on to the beach—a desperate, half-frozen wretch. One of them flung his pistol at Hosea's feet, and Hosea, picking it up, saw at a glance that it was already corroded with sea water, which undoubtedly accounted for his not receiving one of its bullets when he led the coast guard men in that daredevil rush to frustrate his escape.

He fumbled in his pockets and found the key to the handcuffs. The bracelets on the man talking with Cap White were quickly removed, although Cap did it, for Hosea's hands were too numb. And the conspirator with Cap Rich, now free, walked with Cap White up to the new Kyle, who was firmly held in the hands of the Sandy Hollow men, and said to him: "I suppose you don't recognize me, Kyle, but I'm too well acquainted with the description of you to mistake you. Because I happen to be a coast guard inspector. Harcourt is my name."

"Good Lord! I place you now!" exclaimed Cap White. "But I haven't seen you for years."

Harcourt made a thorough search of Kyle for hidden weapons. Satisfied that he carried none, he went on, "This haul

certainly came as a surprise to me. I didn't come here to catch you, Kyle, but rather to expose a surfman in the coast guard that Cap Rich had some doubts about, a fellow named Chilton, No. 1 surfman of Santuck."

"You mean—that you—you and Cap got up this whole thing—to see if I'd fall for takin' hush money?" asked Hosea.

"Exactly," replied Harcourt. "That's why I was sent here from headquarters, to find out whether you're fit to be in the service. There was some doubt about that in Cap Rich's mind, owing to certain remarks you've made from time to time."

"That's right," put in Hart. "That's why Cap and the rest of us worked together to find out about you. Cap fixed it up with me to tell you I'd been takin' hush money with him on the midnight patrol, and to git you to come in on it with him, just to see if you would. And if you did, he'd know you weren't fit to——" Looking worriedly at Harcourt, Hart asked anxiously, "Good God, did he take that money?"

"He did like hell!" returned Harcourt. "And if it hadn't been for this wreck, you'd have seen Cap Rich and me marched into Santuck station at the point of a pistol, like the real smugglers are about to be marched now. Cap's acting got him a bad leg, too."

Hosea felt a little chagrined that he had not thought before that the whole thing was a trap. But it had never entered his mind that he was so important.

"After all your pains," he remarked somewhat sneeringly to Harcourt, "it's too bad you haven't got your man. Me, I mean. I may be a Cape Cod rube, but I'm a damned sight honester than you are. You, goin' round to make fools of underpaid surfmen!"

"Well, *somebody* in the coast guard has to do it," smiled Harcourt, "and I'm rather proud of an opportunity like tonight. Because I've been a member of the Santuck crew for one night. That's an honor in itself for any coast-guard man. But best of all I've given a No. 1 surfman the acid test and found him fitted by loyalty and bravery for a much more responsible position. Chilton, you're slated to succeed Cap White as keeper of Sandy Hollow station when he retires next month!"

CACHE VALLEY

IN northern Utah and southern Idaho the Bear River, rising on the western slopes of the Wasatch Mountains east of Great Salt Lake, flows northward through a beautiful valley, carpeted with rich grass, the banks of the river lined with willows. The great mountains present many striking colors. On the west the valley was walled in by a low range and its southern end frayed out into several minor valleys. Here, tradition has it, Peter Skene Ogden, a famous factor of the Hudson's Bay Company, cached a fortune in beaver furs in 1825. This valley, probably first known by him, soon was known to American trappers and traders.

Of the latter General Ashley, of St. Louis, Missouri, was the best known. In 1825 or 1826 a party of his men is said to have discovered Ogden's great cache and opened it. They bore the Hudson's Bay Company no love, probably. Whatever the motive was, down the years has come the story: The cache was rifled of its ten or eleven dozen packs of prime beaver furs, each pack roughly averaging one hundred pounds, and worth in St. Louis between five hundred and six hundred dollars. The total sum is variously estimated, the amounts ranging from $65,000 to $200,000., although the first figure seems to be about right. Whatever it was, it sufficed to pay Ashley's debts and start him out on the road to a fortune. From this the valley got its name, which it bears to-day.

Another version is that Ashley or his men bribed Ogden's men to leave him, thus weakening his party to such an extent that the Americans obtained the furs at a ridiculously low price. —C. E. M.

CHINESE ENGINEERING

WE SELDOM think of the Chinese as engineers, but there are nearly 100,000 miles of navigable canals in China, every inch of the excavation having been done by manual labor.

SAWDUST PUDDING

By HOWARD ELLIS DAVIS

BUD LANG WAS AS BIG AND AS STRONG AND AS SLOW TO START AS THE OXEN HE DROVE. YET WHEN HIS SPIRIT KINDLED AT LAST UNDER HIS SUCCESSFUL RIVAL'S TAUNTS IT FLAMED TO A RAGE THAT WAS AS UNREASONING AS IT WAS VENGEFULLY FEARFUL. BUT EVEN SUCH A RAGE CAN BE TURNED INTO USEFUL CHANNELS UNDER THE RIGHT CIRCUMSTANCES

WITH A VICIOUS twist of his cant-hook Bud Lang turned the lowermost log on the ramp, then as the carriage of the little mill came to a pause he leaped nimbly, his toe held in readiness. The man riding on the carriage lifted the dog which, biting into the pine log, held it in place against the blocks, and Bud turned the sawed face down with his hook. The man dropped the dog into place and the carriage once more jerked into motion.

Tom Wallace, owner of the mill, was sawing, and Tom was a good sawyer; he could turn out six thousand feet of inch boards a day.

The mill was built flat on the ground on the slope of a hill, a twenty horsepower engine on one side, a thirty horsepower boiler on the other, and in between, with no covering except a small shed of rough boards, the carriage and the big circular saw.

Observed from the viewpoint of its surroundings this tiny plant, set far out in the heart of the Southern pine woods, seemed a puny thing, as inconsequential as a solitary bee buzzing alone in the midst of a wilderness.

In the hearts of two of the toilers—Bud Lang, the log turner, and Tom Wallace, the mill owner and sawyer—burned fierce resentment. And this resentment, sired by causes, altogether foreign, fast was becoming directed toward each other.

In the first place Bud was an ox driver, one of the best in the county, and work of other nature always was distasteful to him. But at the beginning of summer, as for several summers past, he had turned over his team to Kes, his younger brother. When he could find no other team to drive he had taken this job with Tom Wallace. Big, muscular, naturally slow-motioned, he was irritated increasingly by the speed with which he had to move about in his dual duty of keeping the logs on the ramp rolled down and turning the log on the carriage.

At last, though the carriage stood waiting for him, he placed a sockless broganed foot on the end of a log, rested the handle of the cant-hook against his leg, took off his shapeless old felt hat, mopped the sweat from his face and from the inner lining of the hat with his bandanna, deliberately spat, stroked his heavy, drooping sandy mustache with the knuckle of his finger, then slowly strolled over to turn the log on the carriage for a fresh cut.

Tom Wallace was waiting. He was tall as Bud but more slenderly made, younger, and with clean-shaven face. Now that face was set and grim, white-lipped, with dark circles of worry beneath the eyes. Sharply he called to Bud, "Come on, you damn slow-poke! Gimme that there cant-hook if you're not going to use it."

Now in the code of the pine woods one man may curse another fiercely without giving offense—if only the curser smiles.

Bud looked quickly at the sawyer expecting the smile to accompany the words. It would have relieved the tension between the two. But Tom returned the gaze level-eyed, unsmiling. He added, "Git a hustle on you!"

Like a flash the log roller tossed his cant-hook away. "Jest turn them logs yo'self, ef you're in sich a hurry!"

The end of the cant-hook struck the ground and the handle, slewing around, rapped the mill owner sharply upon the ankle. And at the trifling hurt his smouldering anger blazed like flame in a dry brush heap. Springing forward with an oath he struck his surprised employee squarely in the face with his fist.

For a moment Bud continued to stand with that surprised look upon his face, his hand against the place where the blow had fallen. Then, as water within a bubbling pot suddenly boils to the brim, his anger rose and filled him.

Roaring like a maddened bull, his big arms outstretched, his hands clutching, he rushed at Tom—and the fight was on.

The dogger leaped from the carriage, the fireman left his furnace, and two tree sawyers at the edge of the woods left a half-eaten watermelon and hurried down the hill. In a circle the entire mill crew gathered about the fighting men.

The mill owner, a wily fighter, depending altogether upon his fists, had retreated to a cleared space above the mill; Bud, skilled in the art of rough-and-tumble, with a record of never having been whipped, pressed him close, trying to get him within the circle of his arms.

For a while Tom continued to retreat, then leaped in and landed a short jab on the other man's chin. Bud flailed awkwardly at him in return; the boxer side-stepped and swung to Bud's ear with an impact which sounded to Bud like an explosion of dynamite at close range and which turned him half around.

But he spun quickly on his heel, swinging wide, and Wallace, stepping in for a follow-up, was caught off his guard; the ponderous swing landed, and the lighter

man, lifted from his feet, rolled for several yards over the ground while Bud, panting, stood waiting for him to renew the fight.

Slowly the mill owner rose to one knee, a hand resting upon the ground in front of him, gasping, trying to suck the breath again into his body. Then, as a runner starts from a crouched position, he leaped at Bud.

One, two, one, two; right and left, right and left, he landed upon Bud's face with the regularity of piston strokes, so that presently Bud was retreating, clawing wildly in front of him with outstretched hands, trying to ward off those hard merciless fists that were chopping his face to pieces.

Then the ungainly man braced, rallied and again rushed at the boxer, swinging his great fists overhanded, trying by the smashing weight of his blows to beat down the other man's guard. Only through a blur could he see that darting dodging fury. His ears sang as from the wing-beat of a thousand insects; blood streamed from his nose, his lips and from the cuts upon his cheeks. And he knew that despite his strength and skill at rough-and-tumble he was at the mercy of the other man.

The realization and the punishment he was receiving, instead of breaking his spirit, bred in him such a rage as never before had he felt against any man. Each smashing blow fed the flame until he no longer desired merely to whip Tom, to place his knee upon his chest and make him say "calf rope." He wished to kill, and he would kill just as soon as his twitching fingers could find that hated throat!

In that second the mill owner, leaping backward, struck his heel against a scantling and sprawled on his back at Bud's feet.

Bud did not know whether he had knocked him down or whether the other

had stumbled, and he didn't care. He knew only that his longed-for opportunity had arrived. Dropping quickly forward he laced his knee upon the fallen man's chest, his fingers at his throat.

Then with his opponent at his mercy, the desire to kill left Bud as suddenly as it had come. The red film cleared from before his eyes. His cut and bruised lips twisted into a grin.

"Holler 'calf rope,' sonny," he mumbled. "'fo' I choke the goozle outen yer an' butt you' brains out agin the ground."

For a moment his fingers cut off the mill owner's breath; he rapped the man's head sharply against the ground. Then he loosened his strangling hold and waited for the acknowledgement of defeat.

But Tom's face which thus far had worn a confident smile suddenly went white with passion. His legs were thrashing wildly; his hands clutched Bud's big wrists, in an unsuccessful attempt to jerk the fingers from about his throat. Instead of the words of acknowledging his defeat, he shrilled, "Get up and fight like a man, you big skunk, and I'll whip the——"

The words ended in a gurgle as once more Bud's fingers tightened. Again he knocked Tom's head against the ground. He could play at this game indefinitely. He had no desire to hurt his victim seriously and he didn't intend to—only make him acknowledge his defeat.

But at that moment a dozen hands seized him by his arms, his shoulders, by the collar of his stout blue demin shirt, and he was jerked to his feet with such force that he almost fell backward.

"Git offen yo' all-fours," one of the log sawyers, a small man with a big red mustache, screamed at him. "This ain't no dog fight."

Before Bud could recover from his surprise Tom was on his feet again and at him like a whirlwind. And from then on the big man was as helpless as his enemy had been when he lay prone on his back with Bud's heavy knee in his chest.

Finally he mill owner desisted from his merciless punishment. With his open hand he slapped Bud in the face.

"Now *you* holler 'calf rope,'" he cried derisively.

Bud blinked at him through swollen lids and again rushed. The mill owner sidestepped and once more slapped him. The men began to gibe at Bud, and he turned on them like a baited bear. His outstertched hand almost caught the little red-mustached sawyer who scuttled away like a frightened rabbit but, at a safe distance, turned and jeered.

Once more Bud staggered groggily toward his enemy who slapped him again, and again leaped out of reach.

"Holler 'calf rope,' you mule-headed fool!"

Staggering dizzily toward the exulting voice Bud suddenly heard the rush of small feet, the rustle of skirts. He found himself looking down into the blazing brown eyes of Belle, Tom's wife, attracted from her cook stove in the nearby shack by the spectators' derisive shouts.

As she looked up into Bud's face, the girl's eyes softened in pity. "Tom," she said severely, "you ought to be ashamed of yourself! Why did you keep striking him? Can't you see that he's whipped all to pieces?"

Bud tried to shout a denial. He tried to tell Belle that he was not whipped and never would be. His swollen lips only mumbled inarticulate words.

Like a chidden schoolboy Tom was offering excuses: "Well, honey, I tried to make him holler 'calf rope.' But he wouldn't. He just kept—" With her arm about him they turned and walked up the hill. In a group, talking together, the men followed. Not one of them so much as glanced back at Bud.

For a space he stood there with a sense of vast loneliness, trying to collect his dazed senses. Then he crossed the cleared space about the mill and plunged into the woods.

Walking aimlessly he crossed a ridge thickly carpeted with pine needles. But when beyond, he found himself in the hollow beside a clear gurgling brook he dropped to his knees and drank deeply. Then he dipped his hand and laved his face with the cooling water.

For an hour he lay there, bathing his face at intervals. It stopped the swelling and washed out the cuts, and it cleared his mind. Only with clearer thinking came added bitterness.

Rankling most deeply in his heart was the recollection of Belle's words and the look of pity in her eyes. He had courted Belle before she was married. No one except himself knew how he had suffered when she had chosen Tom. And now she had seen Bud at the mercy of the other man in a fight; in effect had "pulled Tom off of him."

Through many a long day Tom Wallace had sawed logs in the woods while Bud, with a better job and more pay, had driven

an ox team. Now here was Tom, after a year's apprenticeship as a sawyer in a mill over near Jacob's Gap, a mill owner himself, bossing men, running his own business, while Bud was a nobody — someone to be hired, to be fired, or in this case to be beaten and turned loose like a mule that won't work.

But Tom, Bud reflected, soon would be down and out, damn him! How glad he'd be to see Tom's nose in the dirt. He'd like to have a hand in putting it there. This, in spite of the fact that in his quiet way Bud had been as proud of Tom's entering the sawmill business on sheer nerve as the rest of them had been.

Bud, like the others, knew the circumstances of that business beginning. The mill, with a small initial payment, had been purchased "on time." The tract of timber, leased from Mr. Jacobson, was to be paid for as cut, at two dollars a thousand feet, board measure. Jack Soback with his own teams was putting the logs to the mill at so much a thousand feet, logscale. The twelve mile truck haul to Huxley, the shipping point, was the largest single item of expense.

The cost of production had been figured to a fine point. But Tom had left out of consideration one of the most important and usually one of the last things taken into account by the small operator—the lumber market. Industriously he had set to work, putting his cut into standard stock—scantlings, car decking, and inch boards. These he had stacked on the yard, and when time for a pay day was drawing near he had gone out to find a buyer and arrange for an advance payment on his stock.

But among the lumber dealers in Huxley and nearby towns he had met only with discouragement. Lumber, they told him had got to be like a dog skin— you couldn't sell it or give it away, and they wouldn't let you throw it away.

He had returned to the mill and grimly set to work piling up more lumber. Upon his assurance that he'd make a deal, somehow, his men had agreed to a deferment of payday. Accomplishing the work of three men during the day, pacing his shack half the night, he had grown hollow-eyed and irritable, facing with a bitter resentment the collapse of his hopes.

At last, to protect his men in the amount due them and to pay for his stumpage, he made a deal. From Huxley he had brought out a planer mill operator and accepted his offer for the stock on hand. Seated in the door of their shack while his men squatted in a circle before them he and Belle had figured the outcome of the deal. The price he had accepted was just forty-three and one-half cents a thousand less than it had cost to produce the lumber.

"We'll just wind up and quit, while I can do so with a clean skin," he had told them. "I can pay old man Jacobson for his stumpage and you boys for your time, and the mill folks can take back the mill. What I've put into it will protect them. We'll clean up what's cut and by dinner tomorrow we ought to be through. Tomorrow being Saturday, it will come just right. Sterritt said he'd give me a check for the lumber when I come in Saturday evening and 'tend to the hauling himself.

"After paying up I will have about fifty dollars left in the bank, out of what I put in and—and what Belle put in. You boys didn't know she put in two hundred dollars, all she had, come by from her folks. That's what hurts, to think that——"

But a fierce *"hush"* from Belle, hissed into his ear as she sympathetically squeezed his arm, had silenced him.

Bud now recalled with a sarcastic twist of his swollen lips that it was he who only yesterday had confidently remarked as the men drifted away, "Hit sho looks like a storm for Tom, with no kiver to run to; but he'll pull through, some way. You watch. I've never seen him in a corner yit but what he managed to git out."

He spat with self-disgust at the recollection. The man for whom he had confidently made this prediction had beaten him into a pulp, and Belle, the girl he had once courted, had seen him in this condition and pitied him!

It was after the dinner hour when he reached home. His mother was not expecting him and he had no difficulty in slipping unnoticed in at the side entrance and gaining Kes's room. Sinking down into one old rocking chair he looked about him.

For once he could find no joy in what he had made Kes, this younger brother of his. It seemed to him now that, like the buckets on each end of the rope in an old-fashioned well, as Kes rose into the light

he himself had sunk down into the bottomest part of the pit. He was less than nothing—a surly, broken man, working at whatever job he could find to do with his hands; one to be beaten and turned adrift when he gave offense, while Kes——

Bud heard the hoofbeats as Kes rode to the lot gate. Jo Tyree, for whom Kes teamed, always closed down at noon on Saturdays, and Kes on his scrubby pony rode home as straight as a plummet. He heard Kes greet their mother on the back porch, the clack of the oven door as she drew out the dinner she had kept hot for him. When at last Kes entered the room Bud greeted him with a surly nod.

As tall as Bud, fairer, with wavy brown hair, Kes was a slender youth of twenty-two, nearly twenty years Bud's junior. He possessed none of Bud's heavy features, nor the surly half-resentful expression that always lurked about Bud's eyes; but he had the same firm set to his jaw.

"Hello, Buddie," he said affectionately as he sunk down upon the edge of his narrow homemade bed. Then accusingly, as he caught sight of Bud's face, "Have you been fighting again?" And as his brother made no reply, "Buddie, I've *begged* you to control your temper! For a man your age to be always——"

"Shet up!"

"From the looks of your face, you must have got the worst of it."

"He didn't whip me!" Bud said fiercely. "He couldn't do it in a hund'ed years, with all his fancy boxin'."

"Who was it?"

"Tom Wallace. He didn't whip me, I say!"

"Of course not, Buddie. You ought to be able to whip Tom with one hand behind you. But I'm sorry you fought him. You know he's in a peck of trouble, he and Belle. I hope you didn't beat him up any worse than he did you. Did you hurt him, Buddie?"

"No, I didn't hurt him. I—I didn't whip him," he admitted.

"Who separated you?"

As Bud recalled who it was that had stepped between them he only glowered in silence. Kes continued:

"Well, I'm glad somebody had the sense. And I'm sorry you let your temper get away from you again. You knew that Tom was on a terrible strain, his nerves at the breaking point. Some of the boys told me that he's winding up, that he's lost all the little cash he had, and that he's on the lookout for a job. And you know jobs are scarce as hens' teeth. It seems to me you could have made allowances."

This from Kes! Had Kes been present at the fight and like the others had walked off with Tom without a backward glance, it could not have cut Bud more deeply. With his bruised spirits he had crept into Kes's room seeking comfort. In some indefinable way he had hoped that Kes might, as he so often had done before, help lift him from his self-abasement. And this was the result!

"You ongrateful whelp!" For the first time, Bud flung in Kes's teeth what he had done for his younger brother. "It's me who's made you what you are an' what you're goin' to be, an' now you turn on me like I was a dog caught killin' sheep!"

He was leaning forward, his bruised face quivering, his blazing eyes holding the boy awed, half frightened.

"Listen! When Jedge Kessman, huntin' birds near our shack over on Sandy Ridge, was caught in a storm an' spent the night with us, I learned what a man can be like what's had his chance. Jedge Kessman slep' on a shakedown in a corner of the same room with all the balance of us, kase

that's how we was livin'—all together in one room, like hogs in a pen.

"You was only a little tow-headed shaver, playin' about the yard in yo' shirt-tail; an' the next day I set on the fence an' watched you, like you was somethin' I'd jest found. An' I swore to myself that you was goin' to have yo' chance. You'd been called 'Pete'—jest called that, like yer mought name a new colt—but after dinner I put the steer to the cart an' hauled you seven mile over to the preacher's an' had you baptized 'Kessman.' An' that's how you come by yo' name.

"After Paw died I built this here frame house with my own hands so's you'd have a mo' fitten place to grow up in. I seen that you had a pony to ride to school on, an' I frailed yo' hide whenever you dodged off an' missed a day, an' I preached edication to you till you begun to believe yo' 'mortal soul depended on what you could learn outen books. When the time come I boarded you down in town for the high-schoolin'. Yo' first year at the University I shacked myself over on Hooper's creek, haulin' logs out the bottom, an' I lived on

corn pone till my belly swelled up like a toad what's swallered buckshot. But I supported ma, an' I kep you to the University.

"An' when you came home in the summer an' asked me to help git you a job I learned you to drive my team. Hit belongs to Jo Tyree, but I trained every critter in it, an' I've lived with 'em an' worked with 'em an' love 'em an' they understands me like no human critter ever will. An' when you was learned, I turned over my job to you an' found me a job sawin' logs, till you had to go back to school in the fall.

"An' the next summer an' this summer I've done the same, while I went out an' got a job at whatever I could find, despisin' the work an' beatin' hell outen them what crossed me. All these years, in fittin' you to take yo' place an' hold yo' own with the best of 'em, I've worked an' scrimped an' starved myself till I'm no better than a work critter with a yoke on its neck. An' now you—*you* turn on me an' preach to me 'bout my temper an' take sides with Tom Wallace agin me kase his nerves is on edge over missin' his try at goin' into business!"

Before Bud was finished, Kes was crying.

"Oh Buddie, don't! Don't! I know the sacrifices you have made, and I've tried to show my appreciation by making good. But I'm not going back this last year at the University until I've earned the money myself. And Monday you're going to take your team. I—I'll find work somewhere. Jo is talking of closing down his mill, but you can find work for the team."

But what had been anger with Bud before was now rage—terrible insensate rage that shook him like the palsy. He leaped to his feet; stood over the boy with clenched, shaking fists.

"You'd turn on me an' scorn my help?" he shrilled. "You'd bite me in the back like that? You—you snake in the grass! But you won't! You belongs to me—to me, I tell you! One mo' word 'bout changin' the plans I've sot for you, one mo' word 'bout layin' off befo' you're through an' in that promised place in Jedge Kessman's office an' I'll flay you with a cow-hide whip till they ain't a piece of skin left on yo' back big as a dime!"

"But, Buddie, I only——"

"Shet up! You—you——"

Words failing, Bud turned and reeled out of the room, slamming the door after him.

Drifting aimlessly along a foot-path down the hill behind the house he suddenly remembered that Tom Wallace would bring his money out to the mill that evening when he brought that of the other men. And he realized that under the circumstances he would not be expected to be there to receive it, but that it would be sent to him later.

With a defiant lifting of his chin he turned across the woods in the direction of the mill, afraid that if he were absent they might construe the fact as an acknowledgment that he had been whipped. Morose, silent, he joined the little group of men lounging in the cleanswept space in front of Tom's shack. They received him coldly. To a man they sympathized with Tom.

In the early dusk they heard Tom coming—the wheezy exhaust of his small car, the rattle and bump as it leaped from rut to rut, the thin squawk of the horn sounded again and again.

The men rose and stood watching the road. Belle came to the door of the shack, and Bud saw that her eyes were misty, her cheeks flushed. She had been crying.

"I'm afraid something's the matter," she said, peering anxiously.

The little car drew to a sliding stop before them and Tom leaped out. In his hand he clutched a folded paper which he waved excitedly.

"It's all right, boys!" he shouted. "We may be down but we ain't out, and we're coming back, strong!"

He slipped his arm about Belle's waist, and standing thus he told them: "Ran onto Mr. Sam Stevens in the bank when I went there to get your money. He was down from Birmingham to see about the tail end of a shipment from Rencher's creek. I jumped him for an order and he said he didn't have a thing. But he happened to add: 'That is, nothing you can cut in the timber around here.'

"I grabbed at that straw and told him I could cut anything, and dared him to name it.

"'Well,' he said, 'one of my big mills has laid down on an order for some stringers and left me in a hole for a hundred thousand feet. They're 7 X 16—28 foot long, 90 percent heart, and there's nothing else to go with them. I'd pay fifty dollars a thousand at the mill, but they've got to come at the rate of a car a day and the first car load will have to be at the railroad by Monday night.'

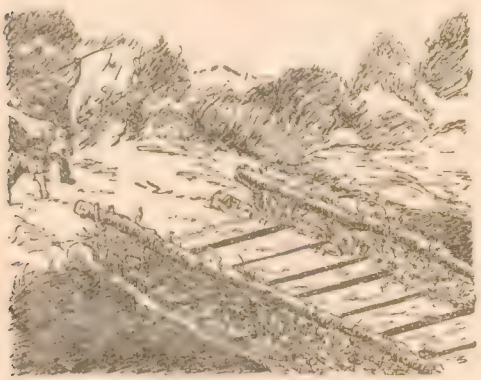
"Of course I know how hard that stuff is to get, but I thought of that part of our

timber down the slope toward the creek. So I told him, 'Give me the order, Mr. Stevens, and I'll get your stringers!'

"He wrote it out right there, on the back of this here envelope, and he's got in it that if the first car is not ready by Monday night the order is automatically cancelled.

"But we're going to get it, boys! I saw Mr. Jacobson and had to promise him payment for his stumpage at the rate of ten dollars a thousand, for skimming the cream of it to begin with. But what's the difference? At that rate by the time I cut the hundred thousand feet the entire tract will be paid for. With this here order of a hundred thousand feet, at fifty dollars a thousand, I can pay for the timber and the sawing and still have three thousand dollars left over. I can finish paying for the mill and still have enough left to shut down till the market is better, or keep running and stack and hold my lumber which I'll probably do.

"We've got to start right after supper, boys, and hit it for all we're worth till midnight. Wes, you and Sim will go over in the timber and begin cutting the logs. The rest of us will build a bridge over the



gulch. There's a row of pines on each side just below where it makes a turn. We'll cut six of these. Three of 'em we'll let fall across. We'll cut 'em to length, notch the ends and drift 'em to the stumps on each side because I'm afraid of the edges of that there gulch crumbling. I've hired old man Bart Ensley and his ox team to begin with and I'll get hold of some more teams somewhere between now and Monday, because we'll need ox teams to get that big stuff out the flat.

"By the way, here's you-all's money." He drew from his hip pocket a package of envelopes fastened together with a rubber band and placed it on the step of the shack. "Sort it out, Ben," he said to a grizzled man in overalls. "The name's writ on each one. Belle, honey, is grub ready? Then let's eat!"

Bud, who was crouching at one side in the semi-darkness, started as Ben called his name first and slouched forward, frowning. One of the men glanced at his bruised sullen face and nudged another, laughing. Bud ground his teeth. As he turned away with the pay envelope in his hand Tom clapped him on the shoulder.

"Bud," he said, "I need good men to help me out of my tight. Forget our little falling out. Come on in and get supper and join the bunch building that bridge."

Bud had to restrain himself to keep from smashing his fist into Tom's confidently smiling face. With no word he shrugged Tom's hand from his shoulder and lurched away. He knew how these men now regarded him. He hated them all. He felt he could have crushed them all—all—out of existence beneath his heel!

In his bitterness he did not want to go home, to face his mother and Kes. He spent the night upon a bed of pine needles in the grove of saplings below his field fence.

At dawn he sat up stiffly. Blear-eyed and unwashed, he remained sitting there with his head in his hands until the sun slanted high above the trees.

When he rose to his feet he staggered slightly, and the bright sunshine of this Sunday morning appeared as if seen through a darkened veil. He had eaten nothing since the previous morning, every sore muscle in his body cried out in protest as he moved; but he was conscious of nothing save a deep despondency. The future was a blank. Kes could go on without him. Life held no further interest.

More in an aimless wandering than with any definite purpose in view he drifted over to the mill, a mile and a half through the woods. Pausing at the edge of the clearing he for a while stood looking down on the little plant, deserted as he knew that it would be on Sunday.

Like a tramp dog sniffing about in an empty village street he wandered over the place, apathetically peering into things that no longer concerned him. Over all brooded the stifling midday heat and the silence of desertion.

Moodily he began to think of his own condition as compared with that of Tom Wallace, and a fierce jealousy bred of his hatred began to take possession of him. With Tom a failure he could have forgiven. The sight of Belle's face when she

came to the door of the shack the evening before had stirred something within his heart and a half-formed resolution had come to him to loiter until the other men had gone to their sleeping quarters, then go to Tom and offer him his hand in their old friendship. But Tom confident, hopeful, was an altogether different person, and it engendered in Bud the age-old, cruel, remorseless desire to pull his enemy down with him, even if in so doing he destroyed himself. His own seeming helplessness to hurt Tom now only increased his bitterness.

Beside him, leaning against the shack, stood several axes, three cross-cut saws and a cant-hook with a spiked end, carelessly left there after the work on the new bridge the night before.

At first he looked at these tools indifferently, then with growing interest. Slowly the realization dawned that what almost the entire mill crew had worked hours to build he could destroy in a very short time.

Without consciously planning he rose, slung a saw across his shoulder and picked up the cant-hook. He was so sodden with apathy that it was only when he walked out upon the floor of the bridge that his idea took a more subtle turn.

With the spiked end of the cant-hook he pried up two planks near the center of the bridge, instead of near the edge as he at first had intended. Seated with his legs dangling through the opening he changed the handle at one end of the saw so that he could cut upward, and began to saw into the lower edge of the middle stringer.

It was slow awkward work to make the cuts from his position upon the bridge, but he worked at it steadily, the sweat seeping from his skin until the denim shirt clung to his hairy chest.

Each of the three stringers he sawed to a certain depth from the under side, having calculated to a nicety just how much of the timber to leave uncut so that the bridge would hold without difficulty a team of oxen with an empty cart or wagon, but would crash through beneath the weight of a load of logs.

The bridge had been screened—a light railing placed on either side and lined with bushes—so that the oxen could not look over into the depth beneath, which would cause them to shove away with the chance that one of them would crowd his weaker yoke-mate over the opposite edge. But he knew that old man Bart Ensley never took any chances, that always he remained behind and sent his team over ahead of him. Therefore, when the bridge crashed through, it would destroy the bridge and a good team, but nobody would be hurt. But it would delay Tom in getting the timber out; would cause him to lose the order upon which he had pinned all his hopes.

Having finished sawing the stringers, Bud sat looking down through the opening he had made in the bridge into the gulch beneath him. Thirty feet wide, it was almost as deep, the bottom sparsely covered with bushes and strewn with boulders. Directly beneath where he sat a jagged edge protruded.

Shuddering, he scrambled hastily to his feet and replaced the planks. It was only when the resounding blows echoed through the hills as he tamped them back into place with the handle of the cant-hook that he first thought of being discovered at what he had done. In a sudden panic he paused and looked about him, but the Sunday stillness was unbroken.

Having finished and returned the tools to the shack, he came back over the bridge and circled around the edge of the hill beneath which, in the creek bottom, stood the giant yellow pines which were to be cut into stringers.

In going over the ground of the proposed logging operations he became so absorbed that he almost forgot his troubles, for with a knowledge which had come from long practice and natural adaptability he saw that it would be a difficult problem to solve. Most of the ground was so soft that it would be impossible to haul the logs from where they lay, for the great wheels of the carts soon would cut up the soil until they sank to the hubs; and twenty yoke of oxen could not drag a loaded eight-wheel "gopher" wagon through the muck, once it had become mired down.

At last he turned away and struck out across the woods for home. He was more keenly alive now to what he had done almost with indifference, and he quickened his pace, trying by increased physical exertion to check the rising tumult of his thoughts. Once he started and shivered, for the chafing together of two young gum trees swaying in the breeze had sounded

like the moaning of an ox—an ox lying broken and dying on the rocks in the bottom of the gulch.

His heart was thumping and his breath came jerkily. He was frightened. As when a small boy, fleeing in terror from the dark, he wanted his mother and it was with a sigh of relief that he saw her, as he burst from the woods, sitting upon the little back porch, her hands folded upon the Bible in her lap.

"Why, Buddie," she said as he came up the steps, "I've been a-worryin' 'bout you. Come an' git yo' dinner. I've saved hit warm in the oven."

She placed the Bible upon the floor beside her chair and led the way into the kitchen and he, following close, caught the skirt of her gingham dress and crumpled it in his two hands. It made him feel better.

Like a famished dog he ate the food she placed before him and drank quart after quart of the fresh buttermilk with which she filled his cup. When he could eat no more he rose and staggered into his room and threw himself across the bed.

The sun was an hour high when he awoke the next morning, and thinking at first it was Sunday, that he should be lying a-bed so late, he comfortably turned over for another nap. His face felt dry and the skin stiff, like paper. He wrinkled it to dispel the feeling, then conscious of a peculiar odor knew that while he slept his mother had applied to the bruises and cuts a favorite lotion. Good old Ma. She was always doing something like that for him.

Then suddenly he sat erect and swung his feet to the floor.

The bridge over the gulch!

He now was refreshed and keenly alive. The act which in his bitterness he had committed yesterday seemed that of another man—certainly something that he himself never could have done.

Vividly the scene that must have occurred at the bridge came before him—the crashing of the timbers, old man Ensley gazing in horror at his oxen in the bottom of the gulch, the poor beasts themselves struggling and moaning. As if to shut out the sound he pressed his hands over his ears.

Then he thought of the soft ground from which the logs had to be hauled. If Tom had succeeded in getting more teams they would stay to help each other out of the creek bottom. Perhaps there was yet time.

His mother had removed his shoes. Not waiting to put them on, he burst barefooted from the room and the house.

That run through the woods to the mill seemed like a nightmare, in which his feet were leaden and scarcely could be driven one beyond the other. His breath was wrenching out in sobs as he crossed the little clearing about the mill. Before he reached a place from which he could see the bridge through the undergrowth he saw that Tom was standing there, with Belle close at his side.

He tried to shout to them, to ask if the bridge had broken through, to ask what they were looking at; but only a queer wheezing came from his lungs, and he lumbered heavily on.

Then he saw it—the bridge, the planking stretching in unbroken train across the gulch. And he stopped and stood swaying upon his feet, his eyes gloating upon the sight.

Raising his eyes he saw, at first indistinctly because of the blur, then more clearly, six ox-teams crawling along the edge of the hill on the farther side.

In the lead was Kes with Bud's old team drawing a cart between two giant wheels of which were swung two great logs, their front ends on high, the other ends dragging the ground. At a little distance came another cart, then three eight-wheel wagons—all five of Jo Tyree's teams, the wheels plastered with black mud. Just coming into sight around the edge of the hill was old man Ensley and his team.

Pulling on the level the oxen were swaying slowly from side to side in their characteristic way, seeming scarcely to move, but soon the leading team driven by Kes would turn down the sharp incline to the bridge.

With a comprehensive glance Bud saw that once the team had turned down the hill with its load it would be almost impossible to stop. The big pole yoke would brace themselves and hold the cart steady, but it would be a hard matter for them to stop it entirely.

White-faced, he plunged down the road, across the bridge. He shouted to Kes to stop the team.

But Kes apparently had not heard. He was waiting for his cart to pass him. Now, leaping upon one of the logs where it trailed the ground, the boy ran nimbly up, stepped over the axle beneath which it was slung by the windlass chains and took his stand just beyond, a foot braced on either log. He called to the team and turned

them down the hill. He was going to ride over the bridge!

Then Bud reached the cart.

As Kes had done, Bud leaped upon a log and ran upward along its length until he stood just behind the boy. When, suddenly aware of his presence, Kes turned upon him, Bud seized the long handle of the whip and wrenched it from his hand, then swung the boy from his insecure position, out beyond the wheel, where he fell sprawling upon his back in the grass.

The turn down the hill had not been made as skillfully as a more experienced driver might have done, and Buck and Brandy, the big pole oxen, were having difficulty in managing the cart.

Bud called to them soothingly. With a deft twist of the long handle of his whip, the rawhide lash cut through the air and cracked with a pistol-like report directly in front of their faces. Again he called to them. The yoke slipped down until it lay against their horns. Their heads braced back, they rested their great strength against it. They sank to their haunches. Their hoofs ploughed through the grass.

Bud called to his pole swing; he called to his lead swing and to his leads, checking them so that they would not jerk taut the pull-chain and undo the mighty effort Buck and Brandy were making to stop the cart.

To each of them he called by name, those eight beasts whom he loved and understood and who loved and understood him. But it was useless. If there had been any chance of stopping the cart after it had started down the incline, that chance had been destroyed by the impetus gained when Kes made his unskillful turn.

A wave of horror swept over Bud as this realization came to him. The cart was gaining speed, the bridge was drawing nearer. He could have leaped to the ground and saved himself, but not once did it occur to him to desert his team.

Then a wild elation seized the man. Running out on the log until he stood high upon its very end, he whirled the long whip about his head. In quick succession he popped the single swing, the double pop and the rat-to, until the woods rang as from a discharge of rifle shots.

At this display of skill the other drivers, walking beside their slowly moving teams, sent up a cheer of appreciation. Buck and Brandy ceased their fruitless efforts to stop the cart, and grandly the team swept onward to the bridge. They broke into a trot; they clattered out upon the planking. Then Bud dropped the butt of his whip stock against his foot, removed his hat and stood with lifted head awaiting the crash.

The wheels rolled out upon the floor of the bridge, and it trembled beneath the

weight; but it held firmly, and safely he was carried across.

For a moment after the cart had reached solid ground he continued to stand balanced upon the log, dazed, scarcely believing that he was not lying with his oxen at the bottom of the gulch. Then he turned and ran down the log to the ground. If by some freak the bridge had held beneath this first load of logs, it surely would crash through with the next. He must stop those others before they turned down the hill.

He ran into Kes, who had followed him, and Kes seized his arm. He tried to fling the boy aside and shouted at him: "I must stop 'em! The bridge! I must stop 'em!"

Again he tried to throw the boy out of the way, but Kes held on. He held on, and he was whispering words, keen, amazing, between his teeth, "Let them alone. The bridge is all right! We fixed it, Tom and I! We came back to the mill yesterday and saw you just as you had finished sawing the stringers. We ran a piece of wire cable beneath each, with the ends fastened to stumps at the edge of the gulch. The bridge is as strong as ever. The others don't know."

Bud stared at him, his jaw slack, his mouth a-gape. His face was so white and drawn and he trembled so that Kes said pityingly, "It's all right, Buddie. Come over here and sit down till you feel better. I—I don't understand you, Buddie. What you did yesterday, and what you would have done today when you thought the bridge wouldn't hold—I don't understand you. Come sit down till you feel better."

"I want to speak to Tom."

With Bud's hand resting heavily on Kes's shoulder, for his knees were trem-

bling and his feet would get one within the way of the other, the two of them went to where Tom and Belle were standing while, unguided, the team wandered on.

"Tom," he said, "I—I—you licked the livin' tar outen me Sat'day, an' I wasn't man enough to take it. I tried to do you the worst trick one man ever done to another, an' you caught me at it."

"Yes, and just now I saw you willing to stick by yo' team and die with 'em. You're a funny cuss, Bud. I don't understand you."

"Well, I want to stick by *you* now, Tom. I'm *goin'* to stick by you an' help git you outen this here tight, if you'll let me."

"It's no use, Bud," Tom said bitterly. "That flat is a regular mudhole. We've been all this time getting out one load, and every time we go in there it'll be worse. It will take two weeks to dry out, if we don't have any more rain. I couldn't get out a car of stringers a day to save my neck!"

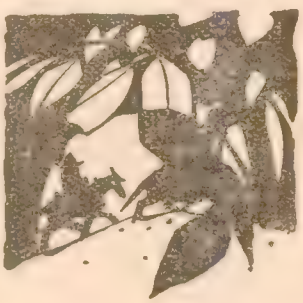
"Oh, I've got that part of it all figgered out," Bud said confidently, with a sudden lifting of his chin and squaring of his shoulders. "Hit ain't no use tryin' to *haul* them logs across the flat. But there's a tongue of high ground runs down from the hill what'll hold a wheel all right. I kin split my team into two snakin' teams of two yoke each, an' with me drivin' one an' Kes the yuther we kin snake them logs to the high ground faster'n the teams kin git 'em away from there. They'll slide through that mud like they was greased. Won't you let me do it, Tom?"

"Let you, you old son-of-a-gun? Here's my hand on it! Go to it!"

In the Next Issue

A **Frank C. Robertson** Complete Novel

THE CACHE AT FLOWER-POT CANYON



A story of hidden gold that was to bring peril and adventure to many dwellers in that roaring town of Whiskerville.

A **Holman Day** Novelette

KILLER MACKENZIE

A Maine woods game trail is productive of queer events along its silent highways.

BILL MELODY

BY HENRY HERBERT KNIBBS

OH, AYE, he had a way with him, a bold and hearty way with him,
And many a rancher's chicken helped Bill Melody along;
He brewed his coffee by the rail, kept on the move and out of jail,
So, made his way around the world and paid his way with song.

"I've seen amazing sights," said he, "a scuffling round on land and sea
Now once I sailed from Sydney when I first began to roam,
Our hooker hit Loango Bar, I came ashore athwart a spar,
And the monkeys in the jungle made Bill Melody at home.

Then, heading up them there Chilkoots I mushed a team of Malemutes
And flirted with the Arctic, staked a claim, the which I sold;
A week in town and I went broke; I threw away my empty poke,
And stoking down to Frisco, shoveled coal instead of gold.

That hitch was blistering hard and hot, and stinking on the job I got
To dreaming of the islands—the Marquesas and the girls,
The waving palms and little huts, the atolls and the cocoanuts,
And husky niggers diving in a blue lagoon for pearls.

I tried the tropics for a spell, but somehow these here yarns they tell,
Of loafing round in Paradise don't always hit the mark;
So, slipping down the beach one night I spied a schooner's riding light,
And the unsuspecting islands went on dreaming in the dark.

And then the copra, gin and sweat, a steaming hot or shivering wet;
I landed back in Sydney, headed down among the blocks,
I boiled the billy many a mile, and took to herding sheep a while,
A-singing deep sea chanteys to the shuffling herds and flocks.

But cockneys, beer and kangaroos and cards and sheep and sporting news,
And pastures withering in the heat and rain that didn't come,
Got stale, and so I shook the camp and shipped aboard an ocean tramp,
And took to breathing air again and later, singing some.

We passed the light of Monterey and dropped our hook in Frisco Bay,
I slung my bundle on my back and crossed the big divide,
With plenty room and lots to see from Panamint to Laramie,
And nothing else to do but walk, or hop a freight and ride.

And now," said Bill, his lyric strain unchecked, "I'm heading down to Mazatlan"
A switchlight glimmered down the track, a star shone on the hill;
He hunched his shoulder. "Well, so-long!" Far down the way I heard his song
"The morningstar is shining," then the desert night grew still.

THE SILENT HIGHWAY

By DOUGLAS GORDON

A BUNDLE OF SLEEK FUR, A SET OF KNIFELIKE INCISOR TEETH, AND A PLAYFUL, GAMBOLING DEGREE OF ABSOLUTE VICIOUSNESS WHICH MADE VANDALISM HIS CHIEF PLEASURE—THIS WAS THE HIGHWAYMAN OF THE LONELY SNOW TRAIL

ONE OF THE LONELIEST highways in the world and the most eerie hour of the twenty-four, that silent hour between night and morning when all men sleep and even wild Nature, for a brief space, pauses to take breath.

Every road has its story of romance or tragedy. But of all adventurous highways this lonely marten road across the snows surely must claim precedence. One would have been safe in assuming that the solitary wayfarer then astir on its desolate stretches was there upon no peaceable errand.

A slim dark shape, he bounded silently along through the silent forest. His gait, though swift, was peculiar, somewhat resembling that of the bear; but he was a much smaller and more active creature—so much more active, indeed, that he gamboled as he ran and even turned a complete somersault now and again in sheer exuberance of spirits!

His best friend, if indeed he had one, could not have called him pretty; and as for character, that was only too obvious. Wolves do not wear sheep's clothing in the wild. Every inch of this lithe little person proclaimed him the malefactor, a veritable highwayman. There was, however, something peculiarly arresting about him. True, his sharp, cruel little face more than suggested a diabolical cunning and deadliness of purpose which positively made one creep, yet despite this sinister feature, his appearance attracted rather than repelled. He was so quaintly and wholesomely ugly that one forgave his obvious villainy. He had, moreover, that indescribable air of being somebody, one whose presence necessarily must be felt in the land. Nor did his looks belie him in that respect, for the wolverine or carcajou, better known as the Injun Devil, had earned the grudging respect and generous hatred of the fur hunters of two continents and all ages.

For all his quaint capers, this dawn he appeared to be in a desperate hurry. In truth he was late, having been lured from his path by a fresh trail which had for him an even more thrilling appeal than the marten baits or the red toothed kill. It had proved a wild goose chase, however, ending unaccountably in the barrens a mile or two back; and now, anxious to make up for lost time, he frisked along without observing customary caution.

He thought he was alone, but someone else knew better. Not far ahead a huge low growing spruce overhung his runway. From the angle at which he approached it the tree presented nothing save looming blackness, but the last beams of a waning moon, filtering through the evergreens, awoke an answering gleam in two pale green eyes, behind which a grotesque goblin face, surmounted with ear-tufts like stunted horns, peered hungrily at the approaching highwayman.

Now the wolverine is a quarry of whom other forest prowlers usually fight shy. But this was the gaunt month of March

when famine, who is no respecter of paunches or persons, stalked through the woods. The goblin, a great Canada lynx, braced his powerful limbs and got ready.

Apparently suspecting nothing, the highwayman came on until within a few yards of the fateful spruce, when he swerved from his course and skirted the tree, peering hard into its shadow.

Then the lynx struck. There was an electrifying screech as the gray body shot from the boughs, a flurry of savage eyes and fangs and claws. Few creatures indeed would have awaited such an onset. The highwayman was not of that fearless elect. He fairly somersaulted out of the way, but, while most beasts would have fled incontinently, when once clear he whirled round and faced the danger.

Furious at having missed, the great cat sprang again. But this time the highwayman was ready. He leaped aside untouched. Then, before the lynx had time to turn, he darted in with sharp teeth, jumping clear again to avoid the sweep of a huge paw which bade fair to obliterate him. Then the lynx's bad temper got the better of him. A dozen times he sprang, striking wildly and therefore ineffectually; and as he grew more reckless in his rage, the smaller animal began to take the offensive.

Darting in and out quick as light, dodging the clumsy paws, administering judicious nips when chance occurred, the highwayman certainly was getting the better of the argument, when a sudden sense of new peril impending caused him to spring aside and scuttle away across the snow. He was none to soon. A sneaking glance over his shoulder revealed a second lynx, a gray shadow in the moonlight, crouching where he had been but a second before. Nor did the wolverine pause to take breath till he had gained the top of a huge stump a good half mile away.

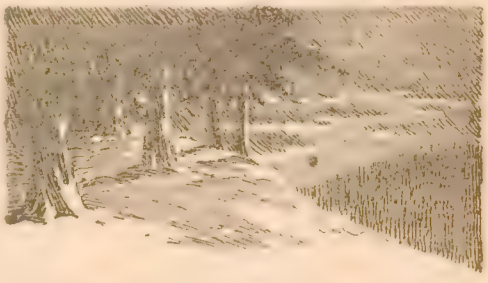
Here he crouched awhile, motionless, watching the back track. Nothing came, however, no stealing shape along the moonlit way; and, having satisfied himself upon that score, he sat up and proceeded to cleanse his fine fur until no trace of the recent rough-and-tumble remained. Then, slipping noiselessly down, he resumed his interrupted course.

He had one more errand to perform, which meant one more marten trap to visit and despoil, if possible. His way of life lay up and down the road, and involved an unending duel between himself and Rob Ebden, the trapper who long had vowed dire vengeance upon the elusive beast.

Day was breaking when he sighted the trap, cunningly constructed under a huge cedar, and baited with a piece of fish. One glance sufficed, and he approached on swift but cautious feet, to read the story of yet another tragedy of the road. There was the ring of spoor, barely dimpling the snow, there the little foot-prints inleading, and there, filling the narrow entrance, a huddle of soft brown fur, securely pinned beneath the fatal deadfall.

The highwayman inspected the contrivance cautiously, but he had wrecked too many pen traps to be in any doubt about what to do. Choosing the weakest spot, he fell to work, wrenching out the stakes with teeth and claws and scattering them in every direction until he had uncovered the bait. This he demolished with relish. The stringy flesh of the marten did not tempt him, but rather than leave the valuable pelt to the trapper he tore it into several pieces. Then, having done as much mischief as possible, he was about to frisk away when his glance fell upon a fresh snowshoe track leading toward an old pine in the vicinity.

Curiosity is the wolverine's besetting sin. He knew well enough that the trapper usually took exactly the opposite way.



Convinced that his enemy had some special purpose in visiting that tree, carcajou must needs have a look, too.

For once, however, his curiosity was baffled. So far as could be seen the man merely had walked to the place and gone away again. More puzzled than ever he sat erect and looked about, sniffing and peering everywhere. Suddenly his attention centered upon a patch of snow near the foot of the tree. It looked loose and yielded readily to the pressure of his nose. He thrust his muzzle as far down as it would go, took several long sniffs and the murder was out. The trapper had cached some choice pelts deep under the snow.

Carcajou bristled with contempt. That anyone should have thought to fool him so easily! A few seconds of furious

scratching brought the treasure to light. It consisted of twelve beautiful skins, a trapper's sieve and a few other accessories. The latter he hammered to pieces with his strong paws, then, prompted by some mischievous impulse, collected the fragments, replaced them in the hole and carefully covered them with snow as before. Then after surveying his work with a comically self satisfied expression on his dark little face, he gathered the furs between his teeth and ran swiftly back across the snow to a point where he expected to pick up the lynx's trail.

Once again the spirit of mischief had entered his brain and sketched a cunning trick. He soon found the broad catlike tracks, leading in a straight double line to a wooded gully up which he trod warily, ready to take to his heels at any moment if need be. Nothing happened, however, and the trail ended eventually at the mouth of a dark narrow cave, formed by tumbled rocks.

So that was their lair! Very deliberately he laid down his load, tore every skin into shreds and scattered the pieces about in a manner to suggest that the cave dwellers were the culprits. Then scampering off at a breakneck pace, he put quick miles between himself and possible retribution.

His next business was to visit his storehouse, a certain hollow stump where various savory morsels were secreted for future consumption. He frisked along unconcernedly enough, anticipating nothing in the way of adventure; but when near the place he stopped as if shot, peered ahead for an instant, then darted forward, sputtering and scolding like an angry squirrel. Another wolverine was in the very act of plundering his larder!

His little ferrety eyes had been coal black a second before. Now they were red and literally snapping as he rushed headlong to the assault. The thief should have turned tail, but, strange to say, it continued its ransacking operations with the most disarming assurance. And, stranger still, when actually within spring the highwayman stopped short and cut a ludicrous figure in his effort to avoid collision with the animal he had been about to attack. This was a female, by forest law immune from violence.

That altered the situation. He remembered the trail he had followed at dawn, and felt and looked remarkably foolish. The lady meanwhile had not turned a hair. She continued to unearth and demolish one titbit after another, as though alone; but there was that in her eye when once or twice she deigned him a glance which made even the highwayman keep his distance.

Sitting disconsolately on his tail, he watched the beauty finish her meal, after which she made her toilet, then gamboled away without so much as a word of thanks. The moment she was out of sight he leaped to his feet, glanced hurriedly into the plundered store to see what remained, then stealthily followed the object of his desire. Had he been worldly wise he would have known what to expect, but understanding the fair sex as little as most males, he was nothing short of panic-stricken when, sneaking round a fir-bole, he encountered a whirlwind of brown fur and sharp teeth and claws which left their marks upon various parts of his person before he could disentangle himself. Nor did he get the compliment of a backward glance from the lady, when, having sufficiently punished his temerity, she resumed her way.

This time our friend, being something of a philosopher, made no attempt to follow. His day would come. In the meanwhile he made a square meal off the remnants of the feast, then curling himself up in a hollow log, slept solidly till sundown.

THE MIDDAY SUN was blazing across the snow when the trapper accompanied by a newly acquired "pard" reached the old cedar.

"Darn that carcajou," he exclaimed. "I've got some furs stored near by, too. Hope the little beggar hasn't sniffed 'em out." He looked anxiously toward the fir, but the undisturbed appearance of the snow reassured him.

"Guess they're all right. We'll fix this up, then fetch 'em and get along."

They repaired the trap with elaborate pains, then stood for a few moments, looking approvingly at their work. "Now for the furs," said Ebden, the trapper, and he walked across to unearth his treasures.

Among men of his type it is a point of honour to exhibit neither annoyance nor surprise, but this occasion proved almost too much for the sturdy backwoodsman's philosophy. "I'll get even with him," he declared at last.

Coneybear, the new pard, who knew the Injun devil, looked doubtful. "Maybe he hasn't chawed 'em all up," he suggested. "Let's dump the kit and track 'm."

This proved easy, and for some time they trudged along under the great still pines, silent save for the click of their snowshoes, guided solely by the little footprints in the snow, but keeping a sharp lookout ahead, with rifles ready for use at an instant's notice.

Reaching the point where the trail joined that of the lynxes, Ebden, who walked ahead, jerked an expressive thumb to direct his partner's attention to the new tracks; but still no word was spoken. In silence they entered the gully and read the story to the end.

"What d'ye make of it?" Ebden asked.

The other shrugged his shoulders. "I guess he owed them lucivees one. That's carcajou all over."

Ebden chuckled. "We'll square that account for'm anyhow, but first of all we're going to fix Mister."

"What's the game?"

"Come along and I'll tell you," was the reply; and as they returned he unfolded his plan. The other man entered into it readily, and the remainder of the day was occupied putting it into effect. When all was completed they shifted their outfit to a convenient distance and camped for the night.

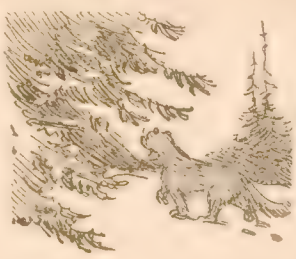
Toward morning the highwayman, on his round, discovered the lonely little camp lying quiet under the moon. From a discreet distance he circled it, learned all there was to be known, then stole away to inspect the pen trap.

He had had an unsuccessful night, and was the more pleased therefore to find this one trap reset and baited. As before, he destroyed the contrivance, extricated and ate the meat; after which curiosity prompted him to revisit the cache.

He approached carelessly, expecting nothing, but upon nearing the place his eye brightened and his whole attitude became alert and interested. There was a good scent on the air, and after sniffing cautiously about he soon discovered that a new cache had been made. The foolish men actually had buried a haunch of caribou meat under the selfsame tree!

A liberal feast was there for the taking, but for once he hesitated. His instinct which never had failed him yet, bade him beware. Danger, he felt, was near, yet there appeared to be no justification for the feeling. Nothing, indeed, looked simpler than to help himself and he began to scratch away the snow.

His claw touched something. It might have been a twig, but he sprang back as though he had struck fire. For an instant he stood, quivering with excitement, then a knowing look came into his face. Crouching down, he peeped under a low-growing shrub near by, and found himself looking down the barrel of a rifle almost at the end of his nose!



He glanced uneasily, round worried by an unaccountable conviction that somebody was watching him. Then again he studied the deadly device till a cord connecting the trigger with the bait caught his eye. He inspected it critically, edged nearer, opened his wide gape and drew the string in between his great scissorlike molars. Another second and the contrivance would have been rendered harmless, but ere his jaws closed he let go and sprang away growling. Surely someone was watching him.

He ran swiftly to another tree, clambered up to a dark crotch where he could see without being seen, shaded his eyes with his fore paws and waited. Time passed. Then a shadow came stealing between the tree-trunks. This speedily assumed the form of the goblin; and if ever animal chuckled Master Carcajou did then. The big cat obviously had winded the bait, and was sure to blunder right into the danger.

It was not to be, however. With a sputter and scramble a small dark animal slid down from yet another tree. It was the female wolverine, and her plain intention was to forestall the lynx. The highwayman hesitated but an instant, then fairly tumbled to ground and rushed headlong to frustrate her.

But before he could cover half the distance she was there. He saw her begin to dig, as he had done, then spring back suddenly, and in the same moment the heavy boom of the rifle rolled through the startled woods.

A few seconds later he peeped round the old stump behind which he had taken refuge. All was still now, and very nervously he approached a dark little form which lay stretched at the foot of the pine. One sniff confirmed his fears. He threw up his head, gave one savage cry, then attacked the offending rifle with his strong little paws and hammered it until exhausted.

Day was breaking. From the camp came voices and hurrying footsteps. The highwayman ground his teeth. The men were coming and he could think of but one thing to do. Turning again to the still form, he began gently but swiftly to cover her with snow, using his paws to such purpose that within a few minutes a little white mound alone marked where she lay. He completed his task in frantic haste aware that the enemy was upon him, then turned to run, just as something struck him squarely in the chest and tumbled him over.

But he was up again, and scuttling across the snow, twisting and dodging as another bullet and another whistled past his head, and the last the hunters saw of him was the whisk of a defiant tail vanishing over the top of a mossy log into a juniper thicket beyond. But Ebden was stooping down and examining some dark spots on the snow.

"It ought'er have stopped 'm," he announced. "But it didn't. He won't go far, I guess. We'll have 'm yet."

The highwayman meanwhile scampered on. For the moment he had got the better of his enemies, but he knew they would follow him. He knew, too, that he was hard hit and must find some hiding place before his strength failed. Thinking only of the men, it never occurred to him that death in another form might be hovering on his track. He had reached a mist filled ravine where giant larches grew, with deep snowdrifts here and there which would linger till the woods were green. Beside a rock where the drift lay deepest he saw what he wanted, struggled to the place and was burrowing into the snow when he heard something behind him.

He flew round with wide mouthed snarl, to meet the savage eyes of the male lynx, crouching in the snow a scanty six feet away. At the same moment another ghoulish head appeared over the top of the rock, and he realized that he was done.

The indomitable had met his Waterloo, but he did not shrink. With a cry of hate he sprang upon the big lynx, struck fur, and an instant later the three fierce beasts were locked in their death grips, the lynxes on top, the highwayman below.

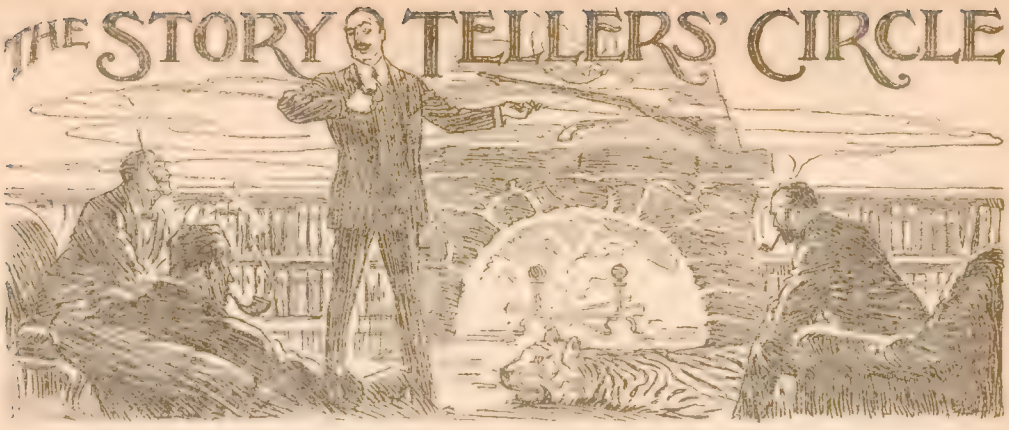
The issue, of course, never was in doubt; but the last act of the drama had yet to be played. From the slope above, unheeded by the combatants, came a dull thudding, the sound of men running over the snow. Then above the spitting, screeching and indescribable uproar of the fight, two rifles cracked simultaneously. One lucivee rolled over, somersaulted once or twice, then scrambled away downhill, squalling hideously. For a startled instant the other stood still, uncomprehending, and before it could grasp the situation a well aimed bullet dropped it in its tracks.

Downhill after the wounded one stumbled the hunters, but an hour elapsed before a faraway shot announced the end. Meanwhile the chinook wind which had been rising since dawn wailed through the larches, and as it swelled the flakes began to fly. Long before the men returned a blizzard was raging, through which at last they came, retracing their steps with difficulty. Half buried in the drift they found the dead lynx; but saw no more of the carcajou, for the newly fallen snow told no tales.

"He's diddled us," Ebden admitted grudgingly, "but never mind. We've got something for our money, sure."

What became of him? The storm wind and the snow-birds knew, but they kept the secret.

THE STORY TELLERS' CIRCLE



A PRESENT TO OUR FRIENDS

ABOUT two years ago a national advertiser splurged on the billboards, magazine pages and car cards of the country with the catchy slogan, "We couldn't improve the goods so we improved the package." During the past two years SHORT STORIES has attained such a peak of circulation, has been given such an enthusiastic reception by buyers all over the world, that the publishers feel an earnest desire to emulate that advertiser beforementioned. We won't say we couldn't improve the goods, for that is our constant endeavor, but beginning with our next issue "the package" will present a decidedly improved appearance. Whiter paper of better quality will be used, of course at a considerable increase in the cost to us—though *not* to the magazine buyer. The dividend in such an investment to be shared by every reader, consists in better printing of the stories themselves, and better reproduction of the drawings used as illustrations.

Watch for the better paper, and tell us how you like it!

THREE PRIZEWINNERS

EACH sixth issue of SHORT STORIES now brings an end to one contest—and starts another. Every reader is invited to send an entry, a letter blaming, appreciating, or otherwise analyzing any story, group of stories, or SHORT STORIES' policy in general. Four times during each year a cover is allotted as a prize for the best letter submitted. Haven't you a fault to find, a constructive criticism to offer? The letters are weighed absolutely upon their merits; even our worst enemy might win a cover—*would;* if his Philippic had a good point in it, well developed.

In the letter contest just closed, covering a whole year cover paintings have been awarded as prizes to the writers of the following three critiques:

Editor, SHORT STORIES,
Dear Sir:

Good reading is both the vital necessity and the diversion of modern mankind. For this reason the ancients invented the written word which in our time has crystalized into a mighty volume of newspapers, periodicals and magazines dealing with every known activity under the sun.

The daily paper is a real mental stabilizer enabling the individual to keep abreast of the times, or as the late Teddy said, "to advance along the whole frontier of intelligence."

In addition to the press and current reviews, are the technical magazines that many intelligent individuals read to keep in touch with some special activity in the line of human endeavor. These we might say are the solid food of a world constantly demanding more intelligent information and more enlightenment.

However, there are an increasing number of magazines which furnish a lighter diet than those catering to the primal needs. The individual reads them with an enjoyment that he does not feel while perusing the regular news. They are the luxuries of an omnivorous public, for they stimulate the imagination like a mental cocktail.

In the very first rank of these stands SHORT STORIES. In ten years of reading, comprising magazines from every known English speaking country, magazines whose titles and styles are legion, none ever has given pleasure and entertainment to me like SHORT STORIES.

The reason is obvious. There is no other publication that contains such a profusion of interesting and absorbing stories.

There are neither space-fillers, morbid studies, nor duds, and you can confidently expect to be entertained by each copy issued.

PERCY A. HILL,
Muñoz School, P. O.,
Neuva Ecija, Philippines.

Editor, SHORT STORIES,
Dear Sir:

My feelings are as new wine in old skins—too much quantity for the quality of the container—and I find my source of expression wholly inadequate when endeavoring to make pen descriptions of even the drippings from this expanding ferment.

Now, as in everyday life, I am stabbing at an indefinable something; flirting with the definite point. Just like ascending to a hill crest in order to vision the beyond, only to be confronted by another hill, and higher. Even though from the heights we may gaze into distant grandeur, unsurpassed in its way, the true and most touching beauty beckons at our feet. Below us, this: the vale of inviting shadows; cool, green leafage; flitting bird life; racing water; tender grass, pristine beauty if it please you. Here is the haven of the everyday man. HERE IS THE VALLEY OF SHORT STORIES! Here the man of ordinary averages walks and communes with such intensely living characters as those portrayed by H. Bedford-Jones, James B. Hendryx, Clarence E. Mulford, W. C. Tuttle, J. Allan Dunn, George Washington Ogden, Courtney R. Cooper and a host of others who talk the language of the man of today.

SHORT STORIES is a living monument to the vanishing breed of empire builders; a factor in perpetuating a shrine set up in memory of our ancestors. Within its covers we find the breathing, living spirit of the pioneers. May eternal peace be their allotment on the Unknown Frontier!

When the Orchestra of the Red Blooded renders the overture "Three Cheers for SHORT STORIES," look for me over in the corner whence the strings twang loudest.

And now, in range land parlance, I have bucked myself out; and probably have not dislodged the wet saddle blanket after all. But who sweats a horse by standing him in the stable? If my "rambulations" have jarred your serenity of nerve I suggest SHORT STORIES in large doses. It will not have to be shaken before taking.

LESLIE E. MERRIN,
Butler, Ohio.

Editor, SHORT STORIES,
Dear Sir:

SHORT STORIES magazine is the most interesting magazine I ever have read. SHORT STORIES has a splendid variety of stories of every kind, touching every spot on the earth where adventure lurks; and some of the most humorous stories I ever have read were in SHORT STORIES.

Several fine poems that were printed in SHORT STORIES have found their way into my scrap book. Some very interesting books, sold later at book stands for two dollars have been published in SHORT STORIES in serial form. In my opinion a staff of steady writers such as Tuttle, Jackson, Raine, Greene, Mulford, Roberts, Dunn, H. Bedford-Jones, Hendryx, Starrett, Brand, Yore, Robertson and many others, can't be beat.

EDWIN KOLESEIK,
2053 Evergreen Ave.,
Chicago, Ill.

A WORD FROM "TUT"

PRACTICALLY every story W. C. Tuttle has written for SHORT STORIES not only has earned high ranking through the medium of the Readers' Choice Coupons, but has evoked a press of letters devoted individually to it—and *not* quarreling, either. "Fire Brands," in this issue strikes us as being Tut at his very best.

Concerning the genesis of the yarn Tut writes, "The character of Speck Steeb in 'Fire Brands' is a composite of several boys I have known. Perhaps I had in mind one boy especially, a youngster whom we used to call Doc. I often wonder what became of Doc, but I feel sure he never asked for help. We learned the lessons of the hills together, loaded our own cartridges and hunted the festive white tail deer on Burnt Fork Creek, when I was eleven and Doc was ten. It was then that we learned to "squeeze" the trigger; and I can remember the salty tears in Doc's eyes, after the recoil of that big .45-90, when he realized that he had flinched on the trigger.

"I hope to use Speck again. Sontag and Swede are just two of the cowpunchers I have known, and 'Fire Brands' is fiction, except for little incidents. I merely tried to illustrate that it is the small things of life which lead directly to—well, suppose Ed Wyatt hadn't got mean and tied a can on that dog?

"One of these days I am going out in the Mojave and dig up some more inspirations

on desert stuff. There's a lot of untold tales out there. Desert rats still plod their weary way behind the old gray burro, looking for the end of the rainbow, content to let the rest of the world progress as it will. *Quien sabe?"*

With every bit as much anticipation of thorough enjoyment as that felt by his thousands of friends, we await those tales of the desert. Few authors are better equipped to discover and transmit the spirit, mystery and romance of that historic barrier to the will of man.

HANDCLASPS OF COMRADESHIP

THREE authors new to the readers of SHORT STORIES—though tested artists all—present stories in this issue. Sinclair Gluck, whose two-part mystery, "The Green Blot," should make many a man clean and oil the service automatic before he locks the downstairs windows for the night, is a successful novelist known to a wide public. His "White Streak," "Golden Panther," and "House of the Missing" have appeared upon the best seller lists over the country.

He has had a peripatetic career. When quite young, his family took him on a trip to South America. Two years later, his father, James Fraser Gluck, a prominent figure of the New York State Bar, took him through England, France, Switzerland, Italy and Egypt. And at fourteen or so he started out, a slim, blond, eager youngster, to see the rest of the world on his own.

By 1915 he had lived in London, in Belgium, in Indianapolis, in New York and in Majorca, Spain, in the order named. Then he joined the British Army and was shipped, five days later, to Mesopotamia, via Gibraltar, Malta, Port Said, Port Suez, Aden and Basrah. In 1917, Mr. Gluck, through the personal intervention of General Austin, was allowed to return to England, to transfer to the army of his own country. The trip took four months, as the only route then open to transports, owing to German submarines, was via Basrah, Bombay, the Seychelles Islands, Durban, Cape Town, Sierra Leone and Plymouth. He drove a field ambulance for several months on the British front at Bapaume and was then invalided to England and transferred to the A. E. F., in which he served until the end of the war. In 1922 he took a long trip, via New Orleans, the Southern Pacific, Los Angeles and San Francisco, to Honolulu, Japan, Shanghai, Pekin, Manchuria and Korea, returning via Vancouver and the C. P. R. Last winter he motored to Palm Beach and last summer he spent on a cattle ranch in Colorado.

Howard Ellis Davis, who presents "Sawdust Pudding," is a husky, genial chap built like a football guard. Blue eyed and ready with a smile, but because he was a major in artillery during the war, and now is superintendent of a large saw-

---

DON'T FORGET THE COUPON! CUT IT OUT TODAY AND LET US KNOW YOUR OPINION OF THE STORIES IN THIS NUMBER

READERS' CHOICE COUPON

"Readers' Choice" Editor, SHORT STORIES:
Garden City, N. Y.

My choice of the stories in this number is as follows:

1_____ 3_____

2_____ 4_____

5_____

I do not like:

_____ Why? _____.

NAME _____ ADDRESS _____

mill in his native piney-woods of Alabama, we're conceding in advance a good backing of iron behind the smile. More stories by Davis will follow "Sawdust Pudding."

Douglas Gordon, whose brief animal story, "The Silent Highway," appears also, is an inhabitant of Devonshire, England, though born, of Scotch parentage, at Knowlton, Quebec, in 1888. Educated in England, but blessed with a strong passion for the outdoor life, his leisure time has been spent for the most part in various fields of sport, and in close study of the wild creatures of North America.

Concerning his premier SHORT STORIES tale, Mr. Gordon writes, "The story of 'The Highwayman' is, of course, historical in a general sense only; but it is none the less true to life, being founded upon incidents which are of frequent occurrence in the great solitudes. The Highwayman was in his way a humorist, which side of his character was first shown to me by a small relative of his, who, believing himself to be alone in the woods, entertained me for a long while with his quaint gambols."

THE DESPERATE CACHE

FLEEING from the scene of a wagon train massacre with the load of golden loot they had secured, a band of Indian raiders found themselves sore beset by white cavalry riding for revenge. Unable to escape and still carry the huge weight of precious metal, the redskins cached the treasure in an impregnable vault—the bottom of a chill, blue lake two hundred feet in depth.

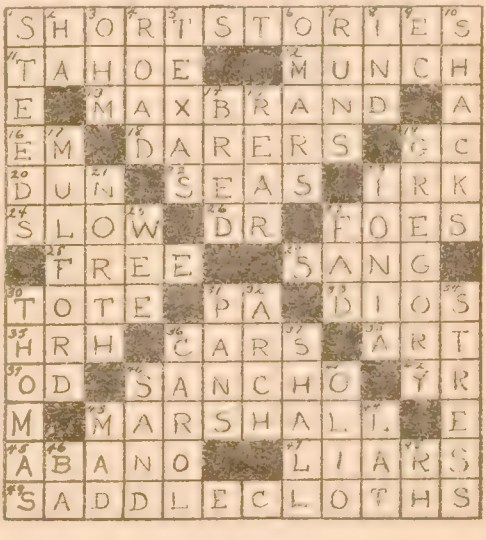
The secret survived. When it came to light one of the most dramatic struggles in the history of the modern West ensued. And in the end, though the gold was salvaged, a still greater treasure revealed itself to the short sighted battlers.

This book length novel, "The Cache At Flower-Pot Canyon," by Frank C. Robertson, author of "The Cleanup on Deadman," and SHORT STORIES favorite, appears complete in the forthcoming issue. With it is scheduled, "Killer Mackenzie," a novelette of the most feared man in the Maine woods, by Holman Day; a chuckle-provoker, "The Dingbat," by Charles Tenney Jackson whose Argo film cameramen are in the way of creating a national demand at the cinema box offices, for the Argo brand of news reel! Sinclair Gluck's two part mystery novel, ends in an extra long installment containing a terrific action climax. R. de S. Horn, whose work, with Charles Tenney Jackson's, has appeared in the O. Henry memorial prize contest volumes, presents a stern drama of the sea. And there will be short stories by Robert H. Rohde, William M. Stuart, and other favorites.

THE BOGEY MAN

THE custom has become prevalent lately of testing a puzzle before passing it on to buyers of a magazine; of handing it to some "master mind," then sitting by with a stop watch and recording the exact time ("bogey") taken to reach a complete solution. Having been Binet-Simoned for a mental age of fourteen, having attained a mark of thirteen point two (out of a possible one hundred) on the list of questions prepared by Thomas A. Edison, and having almost completed one cross word puzzle once, we were elected to the job of master-minding the puzzle of last issue, and the new one offered on the following page.

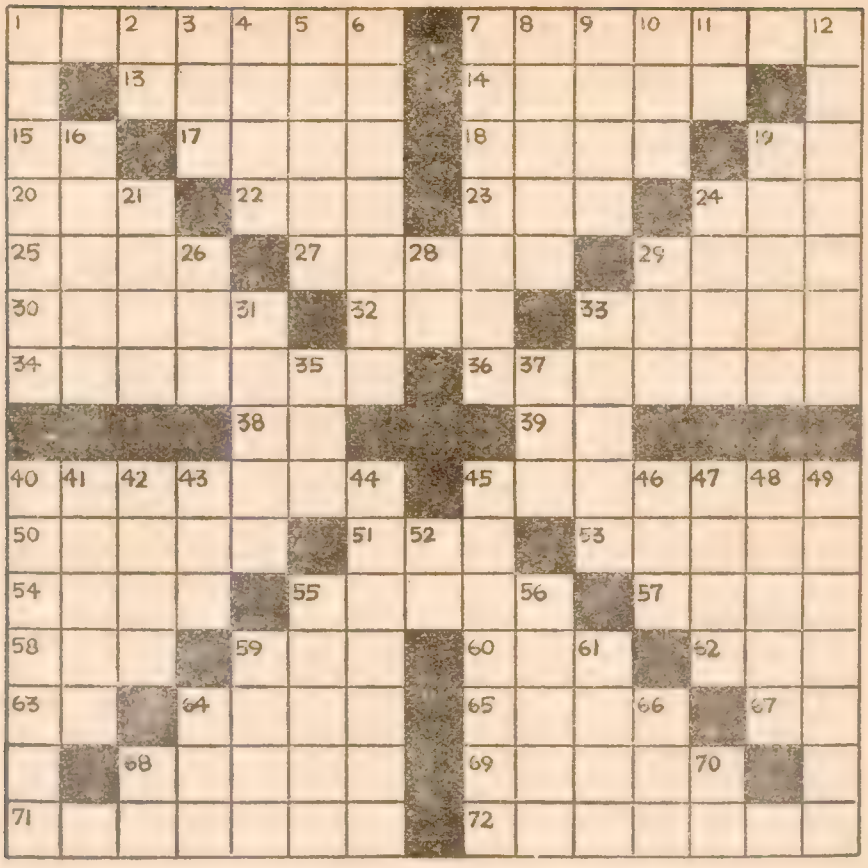
Last issue's puzzle was made to look like this——



—in exactly 6 hours 43 minutes 11 and 2-5 seconds.

Our time on the new one betters this, however. We took only 5 hours 19 minutes flat. That's a decided improvement. Before long we'll be getting to bed by midnight.

Since every self respecting puzzle has to have a name, this mysterious assemblage of words culled from SHORT STORIES by Mr. Albert Buranelli, is called "The Vocabulary Vic, or, Noah Webster's Revenge!"



HORIZONTAL

1. Author of the Argo news reel series.
7. Wrote "The Liverpool Shot," "Salvage," etc.
13. Street (Sp.)
14. A primitive weapon.
15. Middle Western State (abbr.)
17. Crafty lure.
18. Orderly.
19. Dad.
20. Small and of great value.
22. Small——value to be proved.
23. Familiar nickname of a sailing master.
24. Chief of the janizaries.
25. An Oriental people, subjects of Siam.
27. Blooded stallions in stud.
29. Boundary.
30. Dwarfs.
32. Stops a Stetson.
33. Writes the Whisky Flat stories.
34. Grimmer of visage.
36. Kept on many a baseball player farmed out to the minors.
38. The home of Abraham. (Biblical)
39. Each (abbr.)
40. A staple of Eskimo diet.
45. Rear saddle bows.
50. Palliates.
51. To throw down on Cultus Collins.
53. Custom.
54. Fabricated.
55. Ostrichlike South American birds.
57. Julius Cæsar was warned of these.
58. Belonging to it.
59. To cash in.
60. Used instead of a chair by the Japanese.
62. Bug study (abbr.)
63. A syllable of ejaculation.
64. A child's word for father.
65. Defendant's answer of fact (Law).
67. Itself (Latin).
68. One who can down three pies.
69. To dodge the issue.
71. Author of "Hate," "Fight," etc.
72. Stretches of sand and alkali.

VERTICAL

1. Sounds like tinware falling.
2. Cubic centimeter (abbr.)
3. Cry of a crow.
4. Cut by a sharp knife.
5. Water coolers (Mex.)
6. More lacking in necessaries.
7. A quadrille.
8. Spaces.
9. A mechanism for catching wolves.
10. Death Valley at summer noon.
11. Right Worshipful (abbr.)
12. Those taking cards.
16. Method by which a card deck is distributed.
19. Man's name (New England).
21. Change habitations.
24. Always ahead of the sun.
26. [illegible] (abbr.)
29. A Hawaiian native food dish.
31. Loops a hawser about a pile.
33. Small wild goose.
35. Before.
37. A beverage.
40. To take his word for it.
41. As opposed to the clergy.
42. Utilities.
43. A place of sleep.
44. Heard again.
45. Wedged in and uncomfortable.
46. Three (prefix).
47. To leak (nautical).
48. All Adams are homesick for them.
49. Six line verses.
52. Concerning.
55. Mellow.
56. An emollient.
59. Facts pertaining to a question.
61. Social functions.
64. Tillicum.
66. A drink not much good without lemons, limes or oranges.
68. For instance.
70. Syllable denoting embarrassment.

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(Clair C. Cook
Los Angeles, Calif.)

"We restaurant eaters must force greasy, quickly fried food into our stomachs in a hurry. And our next move is 'take one of these pills each night!' Even the best stomach cannot stand such treatment. On the advice of a friend I ate my first yeast cake. Now I feel like the man who puts coal on a fire. He gets heat units, while today I'm enjoying health and vigor units, and am glad to be out of the 'glass of water and pill' class."

(Thomas Leyden
Elizabeth, N. J.)

"I knew my headaches and unwholesome complexion were caused by constipation. To take frequent cathartics was my regular program and even by doing this I was tired and dopey. 'I like what yeast does for me' said one of my customers and asked if I had ever tried it. I began to drink yeast in milk regularly. Soon people began to comment on how well I was looking—my husband said I grew younger—the mirror told me my complexion and eyes were clear and bright. Cathartics are now a thing of the past."

(Maybelle Conomikes
Marathon, N. Y.)

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(H. M. Raup
Linthicum Heights, Md.)

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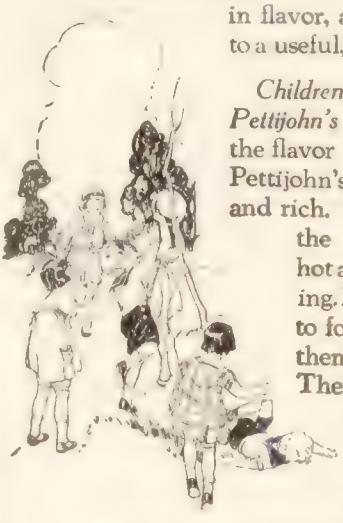

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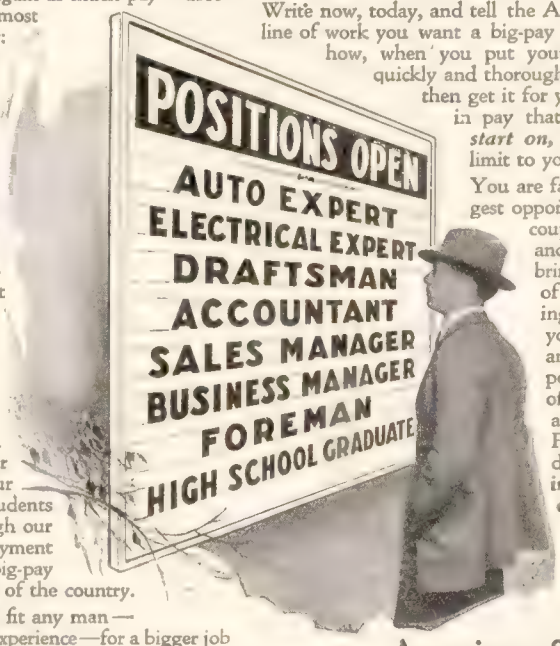

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	....Foremanship
....Civil Engineer	....Sanitary Engineer
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Posed by Bebe Daniels and Rudolph Valentino in "Monsieur Beaucaire." Courtesy Famous Players-Lasky.

She dreamed of a world made for Romance

She hated her drab existence—the wife of a provincial French doctor. Why had fate condemned her to this life, when her heart was filled with dreams of another world—a world of luxury and fashion, of fair women and gallant men—a world of love and romance!

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Then Rodolphe crossed her path—suave, polished, versed in the ways of the world and the art of *l'amour*. Her heart leaped to the alluring promise of romance.

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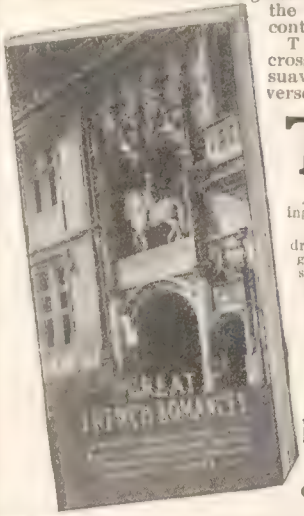
It is one of those immortal love stories of France that are absolutely unique in the literature of the world. For who but the great French romantic writers could reveal the passion of the human heart with such insight, such daring, such power?



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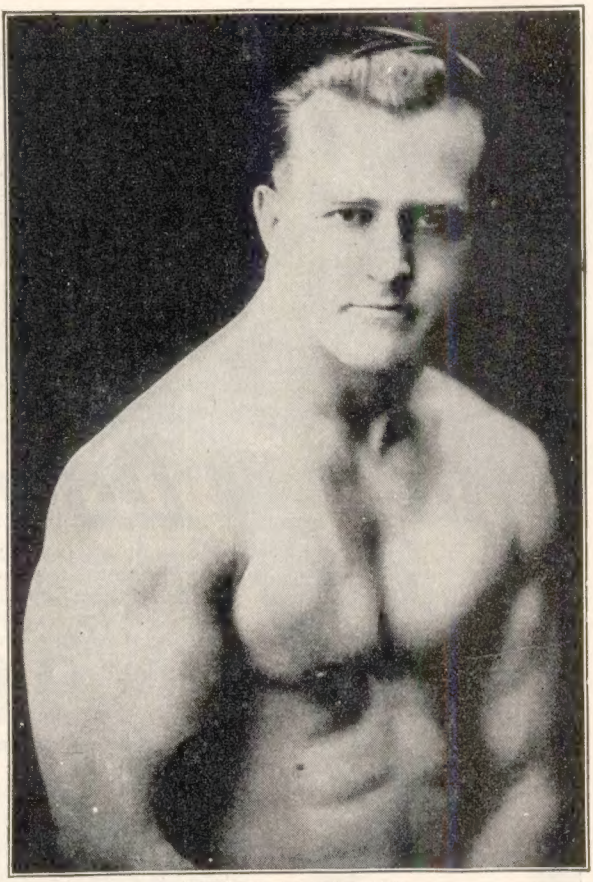

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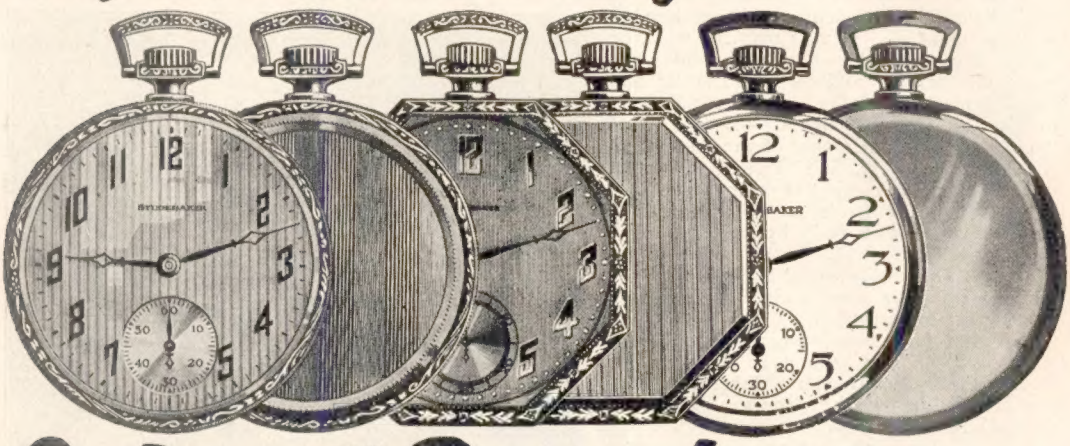

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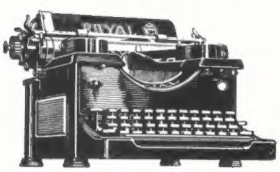

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